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Revisiting Delphi

Religion and Storytelling in Ancient Greece

JULIA KINDT

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REVISITING DELPHI

Revisiting Delphi speaks to all admirers of Delphi and its famous prophecies, be they experts on ancient Greek religion, or students of the ancient world, or just lovers of a good story. It invites readers to revisit the famous oracle of Apollo at Delphi along with Herodotus, Euripides, Socrates, Pausanias and Athenaeus, offering the first comparative and extended enquiry into the way these and other authors force us to move the link between religion and narrative centre stage. Their accounts of Delphi and its prophecies reflect a world in which the gods frequently remain baffling and elusive despite every human effort to make sense of the signs they give.

JULIA KINDT is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Classics and Ancient History at the University of Sydney. She is the author of *Rethinking Greek Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 2012) and has co-edited, with E. Eidinow, *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Greek Religion* (2015). She is a member of the editorial board of the *Journal of Ancient History* and a senior editor of the *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Religion*.

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for
Sophie Huber (1906–1997)
Sophie Christ (*11.3.2013)

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ILLUSTRATION

1. Roman coin, second century CE.
Front: portrait of Faustina Senior (wife of Antoninus Pius) Reverse: front view of the temple of Apollo at Delphi featuring the E
Münzkabinett der Staatlichen Museen zu
Berlin, 18249069

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My fascination with Delphi and its prophecies goes back a long time. In my second semester as an undergraduate student at the University of Munich, I took a seminar on 'Future and Prognosis as a Historical Problem' taught by Professor Christian Meier. The seminar was targeted at doctoral students and I was very fortunate to be allowed to audit it despite only just having started my studies. In many ways the seminar proved decisive with regard to my own future: I became Professor Meier's last research student, completing an M.A. thesis under his supervision in 2000; the seminar also gave me the opportunity to think, for the first time, about what the responses from Delphi can tell the student of ancient history.

A few years later, I returned to Delphi and its prophecies for my doctoral research. I had just moved to Cambridge where I pursued my PhD under Professor Robin Osborne in the Department of Classics at the University of Cambridge. My PhD thesis ('Futures' Past: The Delphic Oracles between History, Literature, and Religion') investigated the role of oracle stories in ancient Greek thought and literature from the Archaic to the Hellenistic period from a comparative perspective. Even though writing (and thinking) in another language at first proved quite challenging, my research benefited greatly from the intellectual environment at Cambridge and the broadening of perspectives that the opportunity of living and studying in another country provides.

Since its submission, the thesis has undergone fundamental changes. In particular, the overall framework of the book and the way in which it fitted into the field more broadly needed further thinking. In the meantime I have made predictions myself (e.g. regarding future research in the field); I have also myself received numerous prophecies, words of encouragement

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and other inspiration from my family, friends and other wise advisors, above all from Robin Osborne, Peter Garnsey, Mary Beard and Hugh Bowden. Before finding the time and patience to revisit the book, I wrote another one (*Rethinking Greek Religion*, published by Cambridge University Press in 2012), started a family and moved continents three times to take up academic appointments at the universities of Chicago and Sydney and, most recently, a one-semester research fellowship at the Max Weber Kolleg of Advanced Studies at the University of Erfurt.

The book in its current and final form contains only one chapter (as well as the appendix) that was part of the original thesis. A differently framed version of this chapter (3) was published as an article and I thank the editors of *Ancient Narrative* to allow me to reprint some of the material. A differently framed version of [chapter 6](#) appeared in *Rethinking Greek Religion* and in *Classical Philology*. [Chapters 1, 2, 4, 5 and 7](#) are new. All chapters have been updated and reflect my thinking about the nature of oracular prophecy as it has evolved over the last few years.

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ABBREVIATIONS

General

<i>ap.</i>	<i>apud</i> ('in the writings of')
app.	appendix
<i>c.</i>	<i>circa</i>
cat.	catalogue
cent.	century
<i>cf.</i>	<i>confer</i> ('compare', 'consult')
ch./chs.	chapter/chapters
diss.	dissertation
ed./eds.	editor/editors
edn.	edition
fig.	figure
fr./frr.	fragment/fragments
f., ff.	and following
<i>ibid.</i>	<i>ibidem</i> ('in the same work')
n./nn.	note/notes
no./nos.	number/numbers
pl.	plate
repr.	reprinted
suppl.	supplement
<i>s. v.</i>	<i>sub verbo</i> ('under the word')
vol./vols.	volume/volumes

Authors and Works

<i>ANRW</i>	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt</i> (1972–).
<i>FGrH</i>	Jacoby, F. <i>Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker</i> (1923–).

Abbreviations

<i>IDélos</i>	Dürrenbach, F. (ed.). <i>Inscriptions de Délos</i> (1923–37).
<i>IG</i>	<i>Inscriptiones Graecae</i> (1873–).
<i>OCT</i>	<i>Oxford Classical Texts</i>
<i>RE</i>	Pauly, A. and G. Wissowa. <i>Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft</i> (1893–1978).
<i>SEG</i>	<i>Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum</i> (1923–).
<i>ThesCRA</i>	<i>Thesaurus Cultus et Rituum Antiquorum</i> (2004–12).

Journal Abbreviations

<i>A&A</i>	<i>Antike und Abendland</i>
<i>AC</i>	<i>L'Antiquité classique</i>
<i>AHB</i>	<i>Ancient History Bulletin</i>
<i>AJA</i>	<i>American Journal of Archaeology</i>
<i>AJAH</i>	<i>American Journal of Ancient History</i>
<i>AJPh</i>	<i>American Journal of Philology</i>
<i>AncSoc</i>	<i>Ancient Society</i>
<i>AW</i>	<i>Antike Welt</i>
<i>BCH</i>	<i>Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique</i>
<i>BICS</i>	<i>Bulletin of the Institute for Classical Studies</i>
<i>CA</i>	<i>Classical Antiquity</i>
<i>CB</i>	<i>Classical Bulletin</i>
<i>CJ</i>	<i>Classical Journal</i>
<i>ClassStud</i>	<i>Classical Studies</i>
<i>CPh</i>	<i>Classical Philology</i>
<i>CQ</i>	<i>Classical Quarterly</i>
<i>EASTM</i>	<i>East Asian Science, Technology and Medicine</i>
<i>GB</i>	<i>Grazer Beiträge</i>
<i>G&R</i>	<i>Greece and Rome</i>
<i>GRBS</i>	<i>Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies</i>
<i>HSPH</i>	<i>Harvard Studies in Classical Philology</i>
<i>H&T</i>	<i>History and Theory</i>
<i>HThR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>

Abbreviations

<i>ICS</i>	<i>Illinois Classical Studies</i>
<i>JASO</i>	<i>Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford</i>
<i>JDAI</i>	<i>Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archaeologischen Instituts</i>
<i>JHPh</i>	<i>Journal of the History of Philosophy</i>
<i>JHS</i>	<i>Journal of Hellenic Studies</i>
<i>LCM</i>	<i>Liverpool Classical Monthly</i>
<i>LIMC</i>	<i>Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae</i> (Zurich, 1981–99)
<i>OSAPh</i>	<i>Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy</i>
<i>PAA</i>	Πρακτικά τῆς Ἀκαδημίας Ἀθηνῶν
<i>PCPhS</i>	<i>Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society</i>
<i>P&P</i>	<i>Past and Present</i>
<i>PhilosQ</i>	<i>Philosophical Quarterly</i>
<i>QUCC</i>	<i>Quaderni urbinati di cultura classica</i>
<i>RhM</i>	<i>Rheinisches Museum für Philologie</i>
<i>SEJG</i>	<i>Sacris erudiri</i>
<i>SemRom</i>	<i>Seminari romani di cultura greca</i>
<i>SJPh</i>	<i>Southern Journal of Philosophy</i>
<i>SMSR</i>	<i>Studi e materiali di storia delle religioni</i>
<i>SO</i>	<i>Symbolae Osloenses</i>
<i>TAPhA</i>	<i>Transactions of the American Philological Association</i>
<i>WJA</i>	<i>Würzburger Jahrbücher für die Altertumswissenschaft</i>
<i>YClS</i>	<i>Yale Classical Studies</i>
<i>ZPE</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik</i>

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Revisiting Delphi

As an ancient story has it, Zeus once aspired to find the centre of the earth.¹ He sent out two eagles from the poles, anticipating that they would meet in the middle. The eagles happened to meet above Delphi, where the Greeks erected a stone called the *omphalos* ('navel') of the earth.² In his treatise *The Obsolescence of Oracles*, Plutarch tells us of one Epimenides of Phaestus who decided to consult Apollo himself about the truth of this story.³ He received an unclear and ambiguous response (χρησμὸν ἄσαφῆ καὶ ἀμφίβολον) from which he concluded that there was no centre of the earth or sea, and even if there were, this information was not available to gods and humans. Plutarch interprets the episode thus: 'Now very likely the god kept him from his attempt to investigate an ancient myth as though it were a painting to be tested by the touch.'⁴

What is the point of the story? What does it reveal about the place of Delphi and its famous oracle in the real and imaginary landscape of ancient Greece? The focus is not so much on the prediction itself – indeed, we do not even hear the precise words of the oracle – but on questions of truth, narrative

¹ Str. 9.3.6.

² On the *omphalos* see Bousquet 1951; Sourvinou-Inwood 1991: 48–9; Kindt 2012b.

³ On Plutarch and his works see Brenk 1977; Duff 1999. Epimenides variously features in the ancient evidence (see e.g. Str. 10.4.14; D.L. 1.110; Pl. *Lg.* 642D). He apparently had supernatural qualities himself. See in detail the entry on 'Epimenides' in the *RE*.

⁴ Plu. *Moralia* 410A (translation adapted from Babbitt 1936).

and storytelling. Plutarch tells the story of a human attempt to verify a traditional narrative – an aetiological myth explaining the centrality of Delphi from a ‘global’ point of view – with the help of the gods.⁵ Yet, in this instance at least, we find the oracle turning down the human desire to know. Epimenides’ attempt to check the factual truth in the ancient story does not find divine approval. Indeed, to ask about the factual truth behind an ancient myth is said to be just as futile as trying to comprehend the quality of a painting by touching it. At the end of the day Epimenides’ question remains unanswered.

But does it really? There is some kind of insight at the end of Plutarch’s story, even though it does not come straight from the oracle’s mouth but is derived indirectly, through human interpretation. Both Epimenides (as character in the story) and Plutarch (as narrator) find some meaning in the ambiguous response to Epimenides’ enquiry. What insight do they take away from Delphi and the ambiguous response at the core of this story? We are probably not far off the mark if we assume that the answer to this question has to do with the issue of Delphi’s centrality itself.

It has become almost a commonplace to point out that, in a world shaped by the large number of independent poleis, the Delphic oracle was an important central institution. In a religious culture that featured few definite authorities, the oracle of Apollo at Delphi was regarded as a rare seat of authority, an authority that claimed to propagate divine knowledge and therefore served as an important source of truth and orientation. Yet the centrality of the Delphic oracle and of the divine voice at its core was not so much material or geographical – Delphi was located in a remote area of central Greece – but *symbolic*.⁶ The physical mark of the *omphalos* represented this symbolical centrality of Delphi in Greek thought and literature. It reminded all those visiting the sanctuary in order to consult the oracle, to watch the Pythian Games or to admire

⁵ See Burkert’s influential definition of myth as a ‘traditional tale with secondary, partial reference to something of collective importance’ in Burkert 1979: 23.

⁶ On Delphi’s remoteness see Morgan 1990: 183–4.

the lavish temples and dedications, that Delphi was indeed central to the Greek enterprise.⁷ If there is a moral to Plutarch's story, then, it is that testing a foundation narrative of Delphi's centrality for its factual authenticity somewhat misses the point. Plutarch tells us that this question is the wrong way to seek out the truth in the ancient story. Instead, he interprets the unclear oracular response, which seems to preclude further communication, as an attempt by the god to discourage Epimenides from his misguided enquiry.

This book investigates 'Delphic oracle stories': accounts – like the one about Epimenides of Phaestus – which tell about a consultation of the Delphic oracle. Such accounts have come down to us in large numbers from a variety of different authors and in several genres: the two most comprehensive collections of prophecies from Delphi to date count 615 and 535 individual responses respectively, many of which are attested to in more than one source.⁸ While some of these sources only mention the oracle and its prophecies in passing, many embed the oracles in extensive tales of prediction and fulfilment.

Delphi and its oracle are mentioned (as 'Pytho') as early as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.⁹ Its prophecies feature prominently in the major genres of Greek thought and literature, most notably perhaps in historiography, Greek drama and philosophy: stories about consultations of the Delphic oracle are told in the *Histories* of Herodotus, in Xenophon's *Cyropaideia* and in Aristophanes' comedies as well as in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* (to mention just two examples of Greek tragedies featuring Delphic prophecies).¹⁰

The telling of oracle stories did not cease during the post-Classical periods. Indeed, numerous Delphic oracle stories

⁷ For a history of the institution of the Delphic oracle see now Scott 2014. On the centrality of Delphi see also Rosenberger 2001: 141–7.

⁸ Parke and Wormell 1956, vol. 2; Fontenrose 1978: 244–416. The discrepancy between the totals is mostly due to differing attitudes towards what should count as an individual response.

⁹ See Hom. *Il.* 2.519, 9.405; Hom. *Od.* 8.79–81, 11.580f.

¹⁰ See the respective entries on these authors and texts in the *index locorum* of Fontenrose 1978: 453–4 (Herodotus), 457 (Xenophon), 452 (Aristophanes) 451–2 (Aeschylus) and 457 (Sophocles).

can still be found in the rich literature of Hellenistic and Roman Greece. They are included in substantial numbers in works such as Pausanias' *Periegesis*, Plutarch's *Moralia* and *Vitae* and in the *Library* of Diodorus.¹¹ Even though the oracular institution was closed down by the Roman emperor Theodosius I in 390/391 CE, references to Delphi continue to feature in storytelling up to this day.¹² We may, for example, think of William Golding's unfinished last novel *The Double Tongue*, which is narrated from the point of view of a Pythia at Delphi.¹³ Or we may recall the oracle in the Hollywood blockbuster *The Matrix*, featuring a female oracle stubbornly refusing to speak straight: 'Sorry kid. You got the gift, but it looks like you are waiting for something.'¹⁴ Oracle stories, it seems, have never really fallen out of fashion.

Many of our sources on Delphi do not just report the prophecy itself but also enlighten us as to the kind of questions that were allegedly put to the oracle.¹⁵ Indeed, oracle stories are fantastic sources to find out what kind of concerns troubled people in the ancient world and what problems prompted them to resort to oracular divination. To what god shall we sacrifice? Is it better to do X or Y?¹⁶

These accounts typically also tell us about human success or failure in 'making sense' of the divine words. Moreover, with one noticeable exception (which is in itself meaningful – see [chapter 3](#)), all these stories confirm the belief in the divine capacity to survey the past, present and future, because the divine

¹¹ For a complete list of all references to Delphi and its prophecies in these (and other) ancient authors see Fontenrose 1978, in particular 456 (Plutarch), 455 (Pausanias) and 453 (Diodorus).

¹² Numerous examples could be listed here. They include merely coincidental references (e.g. Tsoukalis and Emmanouilidis 2011) as well as allusions in popular literature (e.g. MacGregor 1991). See Wood 2003: 211–28, 229–50 for a discussion of Delphic themes outside of classical literature. On the decline and end of the institution of the Delphic oracle in antiquity see Thompson 1946; Gregory 1983; Levin 1989; and, more recently, Scott 2014: 223–44, 245–9.

¹³ Golding 1995.

¹⁴ A quote from the oracle in the first film of the Matrix trilogy.

¹⁵ On this point see in detail Bowden 2005: 109–33.

¹⁶ See Fontenrose 1978: 35–9 on the different ways in which questions to the oracle were framed. On the questions allegedly put to the oracle by the Athenians see Bowden 2005: 109–33.

prediction at the core of these narratives *always* and *inevitably* is fulfilled in the end.

More frequently than not, of course, this fulfilment occurs in wholly unexpected ways, as in the case of one Phalanthus of Sparta, who consulted the Pythia about a military enterprise.¹⁷ He received the response that he would gain both a territory and a city when he saw rain falling from a cloudless sky. After several failed attempts, he finally remembered the prophecy. He realised that the prediction featured an *adynaton* ('an impossibility') set out as a condition for his success – and despaired. Surely his plans would not succeed as it cannot possibly rain from a blue sky? Yet the prophecy was fulfilled when Phalanthus puts his head down in his wife's lap and bemoaned his fate. She felt such sympathy for her husband's misery that she began to cry. Her name, we learn, is Aethra ('Clear Sky'); her tears were the drops of rain that fell seemingly out of the blue. It will come as no surprise that the very same night Phalanthus is said to have taken the city of Tarentum.

The focus of this story is certainly on the unlikely and marvellous ways in which the oracle becomes true. There is a profound sense of anticipation in the beginning of the story, when we hear about the seemingly impossible prediction, matched by the equally distinct sense of surprise about the way in which events turn out. The oracle and its eventual fulfilment frame the narrative and direct the reader's attention to what happens in between. It is exactly this 'in-between' that we will focus on in the following chapters of this book.

Authorities and Authenticities

How have oracle stories been studied in the past? Unsurprisingly perhaps, given the nineteenth-century pre-occupation with 'what really happened', older scholarship has shared Epimenides' concern with realism. At first, the only kind of truth scholars were interested in was the literal one,

¹⁷ Paus. 10.10.6; Plu. *Moralia* 408A. For an excellent interpretation of this story see Dougherty 1992.

and questions of historical narrative and storytelling did not feature at all on the agenda of scholarly endeavours. And like Epimenides, classical scholars first turned to Delphi itself to ‘make sense’ of oracles claiming Delphic origins. Could the Pythia really deliver prophecies like these? Was she influenced by ominous vapours coming out of the ground? Did priests put her incoherent babble into meaningful form?

Unfortunately, however, these questions are harder to answer than one might think. The problem is that the ancient evidence falls silent as soon as the enquirer enters the temple of Apollo at Delphi. Either the ancient Greeks knew exactly what happened during the consultation of the Pythia and so deemed it unnecessary to comment on it, or (more likely) deemed it religiously improper to comment on the nuts and bolts of the oracular procedure. Whatever the case, the result of this silence is that there is very little evidence on Delphic ritual.¹⁸

The evidence we do have famously seems to attribute the nature of the Pythia’s inspiration to vapours emerging from the ground.¹⁹ Yet this evidence is late (dating mostly from the Roman period) and unreliable. Moreover, the scholarly perception of the Pythia’s state of ecstatic inspiration is itself based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the point these sources make about the nature of mantic inspiration.²⁰ In the end, there is little if any conclusive information in the literary evidence about what really happened during the consultation of the Pythia; unfortunately the material evidence has not been able to improve this situation significantly (see below).²¹

In the absence of any straightforward ancient accounts of how the Pythia came to deliver the prophecies, some scholars have resorted to the means of practical experimentation.

¹⁸ See Fontenrose 1978: 196–228; Bowden 2005: 12–39 for a critical discussion of the evidence.

¹⁹ See e.g. Diod. 16.26.2–4; Plu. *Moralia* 402B; Str. 9.3.5 with Fontenrose 1978: 197–203, 204–12.

²⁰ As Fontenrose 1978: 204 has rightly pointed out, ‘the conception of the Pythia’s madness, found in a few late writers, has its origins in Plato’s conception of prophetic *mania* ...’, based on the word play *mantikē/manikē* and parallel to telestic, poetic, and amorous *mania*. On the nature of divine inspiration see also Dietrich 1990; Holzhausen 1993. On the vapour theory see Oppé 1904; Littleton 1986.

²¹ See Scott 2014: 22.

Occasionally, efforts to get to the core of the matter took on a fairly amusing twist: Richard Chandler, a British antiquary and member of the Society of Dilettanti, visited Delphi in 1766 and believed he had found the nature of the Pythia's inspiration in the juxtaposition of cold water and wine. He writes about his visit to the oracle:

I began to wash my hands in it [the Castalian spring], but was instantly chilled, and seized with a tremor, which rendered me unable to stand or walk without support. On reaching the monastery, I was wrapped in a garment lined with warm fur, and, drinking freely of wine, fell into a most profuse perspiration. This incident, when Apollo was dreaded, might have been embellished with a superstitious interpretation. Perhaps the Pythia, who bathed in this icy fluid, mistook her shivering for the god.²²

Another classical scholar by the (itself auspicious) name of Traugott Oesterreicher, author of *Inspiration: Demonic and Other*, even went so far as to chew on a bunch of laurel leaves to see whether this would allow him to utter predictions – laurel is variously mentioned in our sources as a key ingredient of oracular divination as practised at Delphi.²³ Unfortunately, his efforts did not seem to have the desired effect. In the words of E. R. Dodds, Oesterreicher ‘was disappointed to find himself no more inspired than usual’.²⁴

In the face of such futile attempts, scholarly attention soon shifted from Delphic ritual to the responses claiming Delphic origins. The vapours were still going strong, in particular in the popular conception of Delphi outside academic circles. The debate was fuelled by new geological surveys carried out at the site in the late 1990s, which seemed to suggest the existence of hydrocarbon gases, which are known to have hallucinogenic effects.²⁵ Yet already before Joseph Fontenrose published his important corrective of what we really know about the mantic session at Delphi (see below), the question of the meaning and interpretation of the oracles themselves had taken centre

²² Chandler 1817, vol. 2: 302.

²³ See e.g. Call. *Iamb.* 4.26–7; Ar. *Pl.* 213 with Fontenrose 1978: 224, n. 38 with further references.

²⁴ Dodds 1951: 73; Oesterreicher 1930: 319, n. 3 as discussed by Dodds 1951: 73.

²⁵ See de Boer, Hale and Chanton 2001.

stage. Classical scholars soon realised that the question of the nature of the Pythia's inspiration does not get us very far in understanding the oracles themselves. The reason for this is that many of the more memorable responses and the stories that contain them are carefully crafted and obviously not the product of some drug-induced state of mind: they are more like poetry in their capacity to refer to the world through figurative language.

At first, classical scholars pursued the same quest for realism they applied to Delphic ritual by focusing on the responses themselves. That is to say that in looking at these responses, classical scholarship has for a long time followed Epimenides in attempting to separate fact from fiction. Was a particular response really delivered at Delphi? Who may have circulated it after the event, and for what reason? These questions preoccupy much historically oriented scholarship on Delphi to this day. In order to write a history from these accounts, many scholars have subjected them to a form of historical criticism, which remains deeply committed to the idea of *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*.

Questions about the historicity of oracles, for example, prevail in what remains the most comprehensive collection of Delphic prophecies to date. In many ways, the critical approach taken by Joseph Fontenrose in his study *The Delphic Oracles* (1978) – with all its undeniable merits and despite its obvious problems – has remained paradigmatic up until today. Fontenrose suggested an elaborate classification of responses according to the time that had passed between their alleged delivery at Delphi and the time when they were first recorded by an ancient author.²⁶ While his classification of responses does not allow for absolute statements about the historicity of individual oracles, Fontenrose states that it does provide some indication of their origins: predictions that were recorded relatively soon after their alleged delivery at Delphi were, frequently, straightforward statements about past and present events. The famous ambiguous predictions

²⁶ See Fontenrose 1978: 7–9 for a succinct introduction to his system of classification.

anticipating future events, in contrast, turned out to feature mostly in texts describing events that (allegedly) occurred long before the lifetime of their respective authors.²⁷

When it was first published, Fontenrose's study was an important milestone in the history of scholarship on Delphic prophecies. While earlier assessments of authenticity and authorship were mainly driven by subjective judgement, it was the major achievement of Fontenrose's book to establish a more scholarly and systematic approach towards the responses allegedly delivered at this institution.²⁸ His research also put Delphic scholarship on a more scholarly by correcting many fantastic assumptions about the nature of the Pythia's inspiration and the procedures at Delphi.²⁹ Ultimately, however, his study has been unable to move the questions scholars have asked about Delphi and its prophecies beyond issues of authenticity and authorship.

Such questions are, however, problematic not only because in many instances we can no longer say with certainty where exactly the boundary between fact and fiction was drawn. Perhaps more fundamentally, these questions also misunderstand the nature of the oracular discourse in the ancient world: more frequently than not, the ancients were not able – or even inclined – to separate the real from the imaginary in these accounts. Indeed, there are a number of Delphic oracle stories which themselves tell of (inevitably negative) consequences that befall all human beings who attempt to prove the oracle wrong.³⁰ The bottom line is that in dealing with Delphi and its prophecies we should not subject them to a modernist and ultimately anachronistic kind of realism, which does not do justice to the place of Delphi in Greek thought and literature.

We have already learned with Epimenides of Phaestus that the truthfulness of the Delphic tradition can be found on the symbolic rather than the literal plane. To the Greeks, it seems,

²⁷ Fontenrose 1978: 13–24.

²⁸ In particular if compared to Parke and Wormell 1956, vol. 1.

²⁹ Fontenrose 1978: 169–228. But see now de Boer, Hale and Chanton 2001.

³⁰ These oracle stories are discussed in detail in Kindt [forthcoming](#).

Delphi was a source of true divine knowledge and orientation – even if insights into the meaning of the divine words were notoriously difficult to obtain. After all, oracles rarely, if ever, provide easy answers to easy questions, and what may look like a straightforward response will all too frequently turn out to have a different meaning.

New Questions for the Ancient Oracle

Rather than try to separate fact from fiction in Delphic oracle stories we should appreciate them for what they are: accounts of prediction and fulfilment that reveal something interesting and meaningful about those human beings who are trying to ‘make sense’ of the world with the help of the gods. What I propose is a change in focus: rather than asking whether a certain response was really delivered at Delphi in the form it came down to us, I suggest we ask how a particular author, writing at a particular point in time and for a particular purpose, told Delphic oracle stories within his work. Rather than test these narratives for a factual authenticity they never claimed to have, we should examine the way in which these sources present the success or failure of human efforts to interpret them. Rather than speculate about who invented a particular response and for what reason, we may want to enquire into the world view and outlook contained in these responses and the narratives that surround them.

At this stage it may be worth emphasising that this does not mean that we need to relegate oracle stories to the realm of literary fiction-making. Indeed, the focus on the storytelling aspect of the oracular tradition is not meant to turn these sources into ‘mere literature’ (whatever that may mean). After all, history, too, draws on the medium of narrative. Storytelling is key to the way in which the past becomes tangible as history.³¹ Historiography relies on narrative to ‘makes sense’ of past events, by establishing connections (and thereby relationships)

³¹ Storytelling turns the past into history by singling out a small sample from the confusing array of past events and by presenting them as part of a coherent narrative arc with a beginning, a middle and an end. On this point see also Mautner 1994: 172.

among people, places and events that would otherwise remain singular.³² Indeed, it is one of the explicit aims of this study to illustrate how narrative serves not only as a medium, a ‘carrier’ as it were, for the religious views contained in these stories – no matter whether historical, partly historical or fictional – but also as an integral part of these views.

Ultimately, then, I hope to inspire new thinking about what kind of history can be written from these responses and the accounts that contain them. While scholars of social and political history will always want to enquire into the historicity of their sources, scholars of cultural history, of ideas (religious and otherwise) and of *mentalités* may be more interested in the patterns of thought that pervade a given body of evidence. They may draw on the tools of literary criticism in order to recover a dimension of the past – and the way in which it is related to us – that will otherwise remain concealed. From this point of view, the history of Delphi’s role throughout the ages appears to be, in part at least, identical with its history in the Greek cultural imagination as a sphere encompassing both the real and the imaginary.

This perspective builds on and complements the way in which more recent scholarship on Delphi has evolved in the wake of Fontenrose’s study. Since the publication of *The Delphic Oracle* in 1978, research on Delphic prophecies has taken first a social and then a cultural turn. The traditional focus on the ‘straight’ political history of the ancient Greek world highlighting political events and chronology has been supplemented by a broader and more complex interest in the different dimensions of life in the ancient Greek world.³³ Over the course of this change, a number of new questions have emerged, questions which transcend the traditional focus on

³² The link between history and narrative is so well established that it does not actually need a footnote. Rüsen 1987 provides an accessible entry point to the debate. The *locus classicus* remains the scholarship of Hayden White (e.g. White 1978, 1987).

³³ For an attempt to situate Delphi and its prophecies in such a straight historical narrative see Parke and Wormell 1956, vol. 1. For a criticism of this approach see Kindt forthcoming.

the political and reveal the broader social and cultural aspects of oracular divination as practised at Delphi and elsewhere.

On the social plane, classical scholars have for example explored the role of Delphic oracles in conflicts within and between Greek poleis (Morgan, Parker).³⁴ Or they have enquired into the place of Delphi within the political culture of a particular Greek city, most notably Athens (Bowden).³⁵ On the cultural plane, classical scholars have successfully situated Delphic prophecies in the context of ancient Greek divinatory practices more generally (Rosenberger, Johnston, Flower, Beerden and Trampedach).³⁶ Most recently, this focus has also broadened to include a cross-cultural perspective, revealing productive parallels between Greek oracles and the divinatory practices of other ancient cultures (Raphals).³⁷

These studies have opened up scholarship on Delphi to new questions and problems, sketching an ever more complex and many-layered picture of the centrality to Greek culture and society of Delphi and its prophecies. They have also laid the groundwork for this present study by illustrating the manifold ways in which Delphic prophecies resonate with other aspects of Greco-Roman culture and society. However, particularly in mainstream classical scholarship, the question of the historicity of a given response has, in some form or another, remained paradigmatic up to this day. At the very least it is fair to say that, all too frequently, it still determines which oracles fall to the historian and which are better left to the literary scholar.³⁸

³⁴ Parker 1985; Morgan 1989; Morgan 1990: 148–90.

³⁵ Bowden 2005.

³⁶ Rosenberger 2001, in particular 48–64; Flower 2008: 215–39; Johnston 2008b: 33–75; Beerden 2013; Trampedach 2015.

³⁷ Raphals 2013. For an early forerunner of the comparative, cross-cultural approach see Whittaker 1965.

³⁸ Literary studies of Delphic oracles: see e.g. Bächli 1954; Roberts 1984; Salatino 1997. There is nothing wrong with such studies. Yet it is telling that in much scholarship there is such a fundamental distinction between literary and historical oracles, and that this distinction determines the method (historical or literary/narrative) by which the respective prophecies are researched. The prophecies contained in Herodotus' *Histories* are a case in point. Because he combines both historical and literary perspectives, Delphic prophecies contained in his work are studied either as a truthful account of the past or as a literary motif, depending on scholarly views about the historicity of a particular response reported by him. E.g. Crahay 1956; Hands 1965; Kirchberg 1965; Georges 1986. Another example is provided by

Yet, as I will argue in this book, what makes Delphic oracle stories so rich and fascinating is precisely that they explore the space between history and literature, fact and fiction, and the real and the imaginary.

This book offers the first comparative and extended enquiry into the way in which Delphic oracle stories force us to move the link between religion and narrative to centre stage. To this end, I enquire into how oracle stories depict human efforts to communicate with the gods. Ultimately I show that there is an intrinsic link between storytelling and what one may want to call the ‘theology’ of the oracle story: the way in which these kinds of stories imagine the supernatural.³⁹

By examining Delphic oracle stories in this way, I draw on the work of other scholars who have explored the place of oracles in particular areas of historiography: Carol Dougherty, for example, has variously shown how oracles are central to the representation of ancient Greek foundation enterprises.⁴⁰ She has argued that the typical story pattern of prediction and fulfilment, riddle and solution, mirrors (and therefore represents) the challenges people faced during the ‘foundation’ enterprise itself.⁴¹ The storytelling aspect of the oracular discourse has been highlighted before, most notably by Lisa Maurizio.⁴² She has argued that the elaborate stories of prediction and fulfilment are the outcome of a long and complex process of cultural structuration, a process that started at Delphi itself and culminated in the ancient sources that have come down to us.⁴³ She has also pointed out that Delphic narratives incorporate a voice that was considered both female and divine.⁴⁴ In

foundation narratives featuring Delphic prophecies, the authenticity of which is also controversially discussed. See e.g. Malkin 1987: 17–22 (with detailed references).

³⁹ On ancient Greek theology more generally, see Eidinow, Kindt and Osborne 2016.

⁴⁰ Dougherty 1992, 1993a, 1993b. See also the early work on ‘Delphische Orakelgeschichten’ as foundation stories in the unpublished dissertation by Gierth 1971: 62–115.

⁴¹ See e.g. Dougherty 1992.

⁴² See Maurizio 1993, 1997.

⁴³ Maurizio 1997. On Delphic narratives between oral and literary transmission see also Maurizio 1997. See Juul 2010 for an application of the same approach to oracular narratives in Pausanias.

⁴⁴ Maurizio 2001.

this study, I show that these and similar questions apply not just to obviously ‘literary’ oracles, but to *all* oracles that have come down to us as part of literary texts. Oracles, I argue, no matter who reports them and in what context, are ultimately inseparable from the stories told about them. I investigate similarities and differences between oracle stories told by authors writing in different genres at different points in time. Rather than distinguishing among real and imaginary oracles I focus precisely on the way in which these stories negotiate the dimensions of history, literature and religion in order to ‘make sense’ of the world.

The following five chapters explore key instances in the ancient Greek cultural imagination of Delphi from the fifth century BCE to the second and third centuries CE. Each chapter focuses on how an author, writing at a particular point in time and in a particular genre, tells oracle stories as part of a broader narrative. We will find that significant overlaps emerge in the way in which authors such as Herodotus, Euripides, Plato, Pausanias and Athenaeus tell Delphic oracle stories, no matter whether the broader narrative context is historical, literary or philosophical in nature, thus suggesting that we are dealing with a unified body of narratives.

To return once more to the kind of outlook contained in these stories and their link to the oracular institution itself: in a recent study of the institution of the Delphic oracle, Michael Scott has shown that the real and the imaginary were variously present in the way in which ancient Greek history (and the Hellenic identities that this history sought to support) was inscribed within the physical space of the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi.⁴⁵ This, surely, is a convincing way to describe what made Delphi such an outstanding institution in the ancient world, explaining its broad appeal to visitors from near and far.

This study extends this perspective. It shows how the real and the imaginary map onto each other not only in the physical space of the sanctuary, but also in the representation of Delphi and its prophecies in ancient Greek storytelling as well. Its aim

⁴⁵ Scott 2014 with Kindt 2015c.

is to contribute to a more complex understanding of the role of Delphi as a real and imagined place, a place that was visited and revisited time and again throughout Greek thought and literature (and beyond); a place that not only encompassed the different dimensions of time – the past, the present and the future – but also transcended the different compartments of academic specialisation, falling precisely at the intersections of history, literature and religion.

As so often in the study of ancient Greek religion, our sources challenge us to think creatively and to combine perspectives and points of views which have traditionally been kept separate. Surely this applies to oracle stories in more ways than one? After all, more often than not, these stories turn exactly on the importance for human success of thinking in new and creative ways about the world.

CHAPTER 2

HERODOTUS

Delphi, Oracles and Storytelling in the Histories

Introduction

In book 6 of Herodotus' *Histories*, the Spartan king Leotychides tells the following story to the Athenians.¹ Three generations ago, there was a Spartan by the name of Glaucus, who had a reputation all over the Greek world for being a particularly honest man. A stranger from Miletus once visited this Glaucus. The stranger called upon Glaucus' honesty and handed over half his money for safekeeping. He also gave him some tallies and instructed him to release the funds only to whoever was able to produce the corresponding halves. Years passed. One day the sons of the Milesian stranger turned up at Sparta, showed the tokens and demanded the return of the money. Glaucus, however, denied any knowledge of the matter and sent the Milesians back home empty-handed. After their departure, he immediately set out for Delphi to ask the oracle whether he could keep the money, whereupon the Pythia allegedly gave the following response:

Γλαῦκ' Ἐπικυδείδῃ, τὸ μὲν αὐτίκα κέρδιον οὕτω
ὄρκῳ νικῆσαι καὶ χρήματα ληίσσασθαι·
ᾄμνυ, ἐπεὶ θάνατός γε καὶ εὖορκον μένει ἄνδρα.
ἀλλ' Ὀρκου πάϊς ἔστιν, ἀνώνυμος οὐδ' ἔπι χεῖρες
οὐδὲ πόδες· κραιπνὸς δὲ μετέρχεται, εἰς ὃ κε πάσαν
συμμάρψας ὀλέσῃ γενεὴν καὶ οἶκον ἅπαντα·
ἄνδρὸς δ' εὖόρκου γενεὴ μετόπισθεν ἀμείνων.

Today, indeed, Glaucus, son of Epicydes, it is more profitable
To prevail by false-swearing and rob them of their money.
Swear if you will; for death awaits even the true-swearer.

¹ Hdt. 6.86.

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Yet an oath has a son, nameless, without hands or feet,
But swift to pursue until he has seized and destroyed
Utterly the race and house of the perjured one.
The children of him who keeps his oath are happier thereafter.²

When Glaucus heard this dreadful response, he immediately regretted his question and asked the Pythia for forgiveness. Yet the priestess responded that to ask something like this actually amounted to doing it. Glaucus sent for the Milesians and returned the funds, to no avail: the oracle's dreadful prediction still came true. And Leotychides takes great care to make sure that the point of the story is not lost on his Athenian audience: 'And now, gentlemen, I come to the real point of my story. Today Glaucus has not a single living descendant; not a family in Sparta bears his name; it has been totally rooted out (ἐκτέτριπται τε πρόρριζος).³ That will show you how wise a thing it is, where covenants are concerned, not to hesitate, even in thought, to make proper restitution.'⁴

Why this moralising conclusion? The answer is immediately obvious if we read the story in its context in the *Histories*: Leotychides does not tell this oracle story to the Athenians for mere entertainment. Rather, he does so for a purpose. What he wants to achieve is the return by the Athenians of certain Aeginetan hostages Leotychides himself had entrusted to them in good faith – just as the Milesian stranger had entrusted his money to Glaucus. To this end, the story's moral is already anticipated in the way in which Herodotus has Leotychides introduce it: 'Athenians ... you must act as you see fit. Surrender your charge like honorable men; or refuse to surrender it – not like honorable men. In either case, I should like to tell you what happened at Sparta once in connection with some property left in trust.'⁵ Who would ignore this divinely inspired lesson in doing the right thing?

² Hdt. 6.86γ. Here and elsewhere in this chapter I use the translation of Marincola's revised edition (Marincola 1996). I have made changes where necessary.

³ See Gagné 2013: 278–96 for a discussion of this story in the context of Greek conceptions of divine punishment and inherited guilt. See Fisher 2002 on popular morality in this story and elsewhere in the *Histories*.

⁴ Hdt. 6.86.8. See Connor 1985 on the imagery of the 'razing of the house' alluded to here.

⁵ Hdt. 6.86α.

Unfortunately, it seems, the Athenians. Although the example of Glaucus was meant to make a compelling case to the Athenian audience that the Greek gods do not tolerate dishonesty and that they punish those who go against a sworn oath, the Athenians seem impervious to the moral of the oracle story.⁶ They refuse to change their position and Leotyichides leaves Athens having achieved nothing.

Although Leotyichides' story does not convince his immediate audience, it offers a prime example of an aspect of Herodotean historiography which has so far perhaps not received the attention it deserves: that Herodotus, at least occasionally, attributes key features of his own historiographic practice to certain characters in his book.⁷ We find Leotyichides telling an oracle story to the Athenians, just as Herodotus, throughout the *Histories*, tells oracle stories to his audience.⁸ And, as I will show in this chapter, Herodotus, like Leotyichides, does so for a purpose.

Yet before we enquire more deeply into what that purpose may be, some general points about oracles in Herodotus are in order. Herodotus is not just any conveyer of oracle stories. Rather, he is arguably the most prominent and influential narrator of such stories of all time. His *Histories* feature an exceptionally large number of prophecies claiming Delphic origins (fifty-seven by one count);⁹ the *Histories* are also the source

⁶ The story also confirms the importance of oath swearing in ancient Greek society, on which see Callaway 1993; and, in particular, Sommerstein and Fletcher 2007. On the oath in this particular story see Cusumano 2013. On this passage as a moralising tale see also Crahay 1956: 97–9; Parke and Wormell 1956, vol. 1: 280–2; Kirchberg 1965: 33–5.

⁷ For characters in the *Histories* who – just like Herodotus himself – engage in the principles and practices of critical enquiry (*historia*) see e.g. 2.2 (Psammetichus' experiment on the origins of language), 2.28 (Psammetichus' testing the depth of a well with a rope) with Christ 2013. On travel to new and unknown territories for the purpose of expanding human knowledge (thus mirroring Herodotus' own travels) see Karttunen 1988 (with references). See also the statement made by the Egyptians that the purpose of keeping records about the past is to identify the underlying patterns – thus mirroring Herodotus' own practice of writing about the past: Hdt. 2.82.

⁸ On stories and storytelling in the *Histories* more generally see Gray 2002; Griffiths 2006. See also the articles collected in Baragwanath and de Bakker 2012.

⁹ See Fontenrose 1978: 435–54 for a complete catalogue of all Delphic oracles listed according to the book in which they appear in the *Histories*.

of some of the most well-known oracles that have come down to us in the ancient evidence, including the famous response allegedly delivered to the Lydian king Croesus, that if he waged war on the Persians, he would destroy a great empire (which turned out to be his own).¹⁰ Moreover, Herodotus' oracles have attracted an extraordinary amount of scholarly interest, with numerous studies discussing their place in the history of Persian expansion and Herodotus' account of it.¹¹ We thus start our own venture into the link between oracles and storytelling with Herodotus, not only because he is an early source, right at the beginning of the oracular tradition, but also because he is a frequent and passionate teller of oracle stories who shaped that tradition in many ways.

Yet the *Histories* have proved a challenging text to consider. On the one hand, they are an important (in many instances the only) source for the events of the Greco-Persian Wars and their prehistory. On the other hand, it is quite obvious that Herodotus uses aspects of storytelling and pursues a conception of history that, although committed to the authentic and real, retains a space for the wondrous and imaginary.¹² In particular, the numerous tales of prediction and fulfilment interspersed in his account have proved problematic in this respect: are we meant to accept that the oracle really played a central (or indeed any) role in the historical events Herodotus recounts?¹³ Did the Pythia really deliver such a response to Glaucus?¹⁴ And did his family really die out within three generations? Leotychides certainly seems to think so and Herodotus lets stand unchallenged his suggestion that this was due to some form of divine punishment.

¹⁰ Hdt. 1.53 (as discussed below).

¹¹ See e.g. Crahay 1956; Miller 1963; Wormell 1963; Kirchberg 1965; Shimron 1989: 39–51; Harrison 2000: 122–57; Bowden 2005: 67–73; Trampedach 2015: 396–8.

¹² See e.g. Herodotus' conception of wonder as discussed by Munson 2001.

¹³ See for example the debate about the historicity of the so-called wooden-wall oracle (Hdt. 7.141): Crahay 1956: 295–304; Parke and Wormell 1956, vol. 1: 169–71; Hands 1965; Georges 1986; Harrison 2000: 147; Bowden 2005: 100–8; Trampedach 2015: 468–70.

¹⁴ On the question of the authenticity of this passage see the commentary by Scott 2005: 315–16 with further references.

Such questions make the *Histories* a prime example of what is at stake in the debate about the historicity and authenticity of oracles as discussed in the [previous chapter](#). To explore at length based on subjective conceptions of plausibility who may have forged a particular prophecy featured in the *Histories* and for what reason leads down the slippery slope of historical speculation. At the same time, to exclude altogether accounts of oracle consultations from our evidence on the grounds that they may not have been delivered at Delphi in the way Herodotus reports them would be to dismiss a central aspect of Herodotean historiography.¹⁵

This chapter explores the centrality of stories and storytelling to the way in which Delphic oracles feature in the *Histories*. Of course, this aspect has not gone entirely unnoticed: in particular many of the fantastic accounts of prediction and fulfilment have been treated as literary devices, allowing Herodotus to foreshadow events he tells later in the *Histories*.¹⁶ Yet, as I will show in this chapter, the link between oracles and narrative goes beyond individual examples and the question of their historicity; it is intrinsic to the way in which the oracular voice features in the *Histories* more widely. I show that not only are *some* oracles in the *Histories* part of elaborate narratives. Rather, I argue that *all* oracles in Herodotus – real, or imaginary, or both – work (only) within stories.

Croesus' Oracular Paradigm

Oracle stories make a prominent and forceful appearance early in the *Histories*. After Herodotus has introduced the guiding questions and major aims of his enquiry and found the origins of the conflict between Greeks and barbarians in mythical times, he almost immediately moves on to tell the first extended story of an individual which speaks directly to his interest in

¹⁵ See in detail Kirchberg 1965, who studies the function of oracles in the composition of Herodotus' *Histories* ('kompositionstechnische Verwendung', 10).

¹⁶ See in particular Crahay 1956; Parke and Wormell 1956, vol. 1; Kirchberg 1965.

origins and beginnings.¹⁷ It tells the story of King Croesus of Lydia, οὗτος ὁ Κροῖσος βαρβάρων πρῶτος τῶν ἡμεῖς ἴδμεν τοὺς μὲν κατεστρέψατο Ἑλλήνων ἐξ φόρου ἀπαγωγῆν, τοὺς δὲ φίλους προσεποιήσατο, 'this Croesus was the first foreigner whom we know who subdued some of the Greeks and obliged them to pay tribute and won the friendship of others'.¹⁸ The story of his rise and fall is a story of the fickleness of human fortune, a story of human hybris and divine nemesis, and of the scope and limits of the human capacity to shape fate.

Above all, perhaps, it is a story speckled with oracles, predictions and omens, Delphic and otherwise, which accompany every significant turn of events.¹⁹ The frequency with which predictions of all kinds feature in the Croesus *logos* stands out even in the context of *Histories* as a work full of prophecies: of the fifty-seven oracles mentioned above, fifteen are included in book 1 alone, of which twelve are part of the Croesus *logos*. By contrast, books 2 and 3 only feature a single Delphic prophecy each.²⁰ An account of Herodotus as a teller of oracle stories thus cannot bypass Croesus and his extensive use of Delphic prophecies in the first extended *logos* of the *Histories* – just as an account of oracles and storytelling in ancient Greece cannot bypass Herodotus' *Histories* as a foundational text in the oracular genre.

This *logos* revolves around four major consultations of the Delphic oracle by Croesus' delegates: first, there is the oracle test, which prepares the ground for Croesus' later use of Delphi insofar as it provides an impressive example of Delphi's ability to draw on the superior knowledge of the gods to speak

¹⁷ The question of why: Hdt. *Proemium*. The theme of rise and fall and the cyclical nature of history: Hdt. 1.5.

¹⁸ Hdt. 1.6.

¹⁹ On the role of oracles in the Croesus *logos*, see in particular: Crahay 1956: 182–8; Parke and Wormell 1956, vol. 1: 126–40; Kirchberg 1965: 11–32; Barker 2006; Kindt 2006; Pelling 2006; Flower 2013.

²⁰ Another agglomeration of oracles features towards the middle of the *Histories*, in books 4, 5 and 6, which include a total of twenty-eight Delphic oracles. Such references are less frequent in the remaining chapters of the *Histories*: by contrast, books 7–9 feature only thirteen oracles. See the comprehensive list in Fontenrose 1978: 453–4, which is, however, missing Q132 (Hdt. 6.139), although it is included in his catalogue of responses on p. 311.

correctly to past, present and future events.²¹ Delphi is able to tell what no human being could possibly have guessed: that a hundred days after the departure of Croesus' delegates, he was cooking lamb and tortoise in a bronze pot.²²

This part of the story is followed by an account of two further predictions, the one already mentioned concerning warfare against the Persians and another one pertaining to the length of Croesus' family's reign over Lydia (ἀλλ' ὅταν ἡμίονος βασιλεὺς Μήδοισι γένηται – 'until a Mule becomes king of the Persians' – a condition already fulfilled by the 'hybrid' Cyrus who had a Greek mother and a Persian father).²³ He famously interprets both prophecies as endorsing his planned military campaign and as predicting his family's lengthy rule over Lydia: in both cases, he is mistaken. The prophecies actually foreshadow the imminent defeat of his own empire and his family's fall from power. The final consultation occurs after his defeat and the incorporation of the Lydian empire into Persia. Croesus again sends delegates to Delphi, this time to complain about the misleading oracles he had received despite his lavish gifts to Delphi. In response, the oracle offers a declaration of the real meaning of the prophecies and the limits of the gods to alter human fate.²⁴

In addition to these four major oracular pronouncements which move the *logos* along and structure the story of Croesus' rise and fall, numerous other oracles from Delphi are woven into the Croesus *logos* in the form of digressions. Some of these relate directly to Croesus himself, such as the prediction he once received from Delphi, recalled in the moment of its fulfilment, that his mute son would first speak on a day of sorrow.²⁵ Other prophecies concern Croesus' ancestors Alyattes and Candaules.²⁶ A third group pertains to the prehistory of

²¹ Hdt. 1.46–9.

²² Apparently the oracle of Zeus at Dodona also knew the right answer to the test question, thus serving as a second witness to the veracity of oracular divination. See Bonnechere 2010 on the confirmation of oracles by other oracles.

²³ Hdt. 1.53 and 1.55–6, respectively.

²⁴ Hdt. 1.91.

²⁵ Hdt. 1.85.

²⁶ See Hdt. 1.13 and 1.19 respectively, as discussed in more detail below.

Sparta before its alliance with Croesus.²⁷ In addition to these prophecies, several dreams, omens and other portents of non-Delphic origins feature throughout the *logos*, highlighting the fact that, in the *Histories* as elsewhere in Greek thought and literature, oracle stories are part of an even larger group of prophetic tales.²⁸

Why this agglomeration of prophecies towards the beginning of the *Histories*? In my article 'Delphic oracle stories and the beginning of historiography: Herodotus' Croesus *logos*', I have related Herodotus' use of oracles to his roles as researcher and writer of *historia*.²⁹ I have argued that Herodotus referred to oracles particularly frequently in the beginning of the *Histories* to establish his voice as a researcher and writer of a work written in a new genre. I have suggested further that, as a religious and authoritative voice widely accepted throughout the ancient Greek world (and, indeed, beyond), Delphic prophecies complement the authoritative voice of the historian as the researcher and narrator of his history. Both (albeit in their very own ways) withhold and reveal certain kinds of information; both survey the different dimensions of time individually and in relation to each other; and both do so ultimately through the medium of narrative.³⁰ The oracular voice encourages those seeking divine advice to relate the past, present and future to each other by finding a coherent storyline that connects the divine sign with its meaning. In its ability to transcend the different dimensions of time, the voice of the oracle thus in many ways parallels the voice of Herodotus as the omniscient narrator of the *Histories*. Herodotus also encourages his audience to assess the impact of the past on the present and perhaps even the future.³¹

²⁷ See Hdt. 1.65, 1.66 and 1.67.

²⁸ See e.g. Hdt. 1.36–45, 1.62 and the conclusion to this volume.

²⁹ Here and in the remainder of this section see in detail Kindt 2006. On *historia* see Snell 1924: 59–71; Thomas 2000: 161–7, 211–12, 270–4; Fowler 2001. Herodotus as 'histor': Connor 1993.

³⁰ Herodotus and time: Cobet 2002.

³¹ In particular the theme of rising and falling empires will have resonated with the Athenians, who were at the time of the publication of the *Histories* engaged in another large-scale conflict, the Peloponnesian War. On Herodotus and Athens see Moles 2002; Davies 2003; Fowler 2003; Stadter 2013; Strasburger 2013.

Given this profound affinity between the voice of the oracle and that of the historian, it should come as no surprise that Herodotus uses oracles to make his reader focus on the marvellous ways in which predictions come true in the end. This applies in particular to those prophecies which at first appear unlikely ever to come true (a mule becomes king, a mute child speaks). Ultimately, however, this is also true for other predictions in the *Histories* more widely. For example, the reader already knows that Croesus will lose power thanks to the prophecy Herodotus included at 1.13, predicting the end of the Mermnad rule over Lydia five generations after Candaules.³² The focus thus turns from the question of *what* will happen to the questions of *how* and *why*.

At the same time, Herodotus refers to the oracle as a mouth-piece to evaluate historical characters and events from within the story. The oracle retroactively sanctions the transition of power over Lydia from the clan of the Heraclids to that of the Mermnads;³³ Delphi also features in Herodotus' historical narrative as an authoritative voice, condemning the burning of Milesian temples by Croesus' father Alyattes.³⁴ Moreover, it is said to have endorsed Lycurgus, Sparta's mythical law-giver, and even the Spartan Rhetra itself, thus again acting as a source of authority and legitimation in Herodotus' historical narrative.³⁵ What these examples have in common is that they involve evaluative statements that require an authority altogether different from and greater than that of Herodotus as researcher and narrator of the events he relates in the *Histories*.

For Croesus, this evaluation moves beyond the oracle simply endorsing or dismissing his plans. It concerns not just his deeds but also the thought processes that inform his actions. And, again, narrative is key to the way in which Herodotus achieves this end. As an omniscient narrator he gives us direct

³² See Gagné 2013: 325–43 for a reading of this story in the context of similar accounts of divine punishment for ancestral fault in Greek thought and literature.

³³ Hdt. 1.13.

³⁴ Hdt. 1.19.

³⁵ Hdt. 1.65.

insight into the mind of his major character.³⁶ Throughout the Croesus *logos*, Herodotus takes particular care to tell us which considerations motivated Croesus to consult oracles in the first place and how he responds to the prophecies he believes to foretell success. We hear that he was 'fully confident' (πάγχυ τε ἐλπίσας) of being able to defeat Cyrus; that he sent lavish gifts to Delphi in order to express his satisfaction and that receiving an apparently positive oracle made him want to rely on oracles more often.³⁷ We also learn that he 'was overjoyed' and felt excessive pleasure (ὑπερήσθη) upon receiving them.³⁸ This kind of authorial information gives the reader direct access to the considerations and motivations of the Lydian king, allowing us to assess in more detail where he went wrong in his interaction with Pythian Apollo.

So where (and how) *did* Croesus go wrong? The Croesus *logos* ultimately tells the story of an individual blinded by his own power. From the very beginning, the Lydian king's mission to the oracles is motivated not by a genuine desire to learn from the superior knowledge of the gods what the future holds. Rather, it is driven by the egotistical wish to have Delphi endorse his existing plans and perspectives. Herodotus' Croesus is a character too preoccupied with himself to communicate with the gods successfully. As a result he is ultimately unable to benefit from the superior vantage point of the gods.

This becomes evident as early as the oracle test. In setting out to test the oracles, Herodotus' Croesus reverses the traditional roles between oracle and enquirer.³⁹ Not only does he already know the answer to the test question; more importantly, perhaps, he also seeks to beat the oracles at their own game by himself enacting the obscure and enigmatic (the bizarre act of cooking of tortoise and lamb in a bronze pot) – the form of signification typically used by oracles to challenge those human beings seeking divine advice with a riddle. Here,

³⁶ Herodotus on the thoughts of his characters: Dorati 2013. On the inner motivation of Croesus in particular: Kirchberg 1965: 18–19.

³⁷ Hdt. 1.54.

³⁸ See e.g. Hdt 1.54 and 1.56 (ὁ Κροῖσος πολλόν τι μάλιστα πάντων ἤσθη).

³⁹ Again, see in more detail Kindt 2006.

however, it is Delphic Apollo who is tested, not the human enquirer.

Of course the Delphic oracle sees through what Croesus has cooked up; yet how the oracle rises to the challenge is lost on the Lydian king. He hears only what he wants to hear – the second part of the oracle correctly answering his test question – and pays no attention whatsoever to the first part of the response, which makes a strong statement of divine knowledge being different from human knowledge:

οἶδα δ' ἐγὼ ψάμμου τ' ἀριθμὸν καὶ μέτρα θαλάσσης,
καὶ κωφοῦ συνήμι καὶ οὐ φωνεῦντος ἀκούω.

I know the grains of sand on the beach and measure the sea;
I understand the speech of the dumb and hear the voiceless.⁴⁰

Gods, this part of the prediction says, know what no human being can possibly know: even the grains of sand on the beach. They understand what cannot be understood by human comprehension. These points are surely meant to include a strong warning for Croesus that gods and humans are situated on ontologically different planes. While the gods are omniscient, human knowledge is much more limited. Humans cannot measure the sea. Nor can they understand the dumb and hear the voiceless.

The enigmatic mode in which the gods speak through oracles to those humans seeking divine knowledge, then, represents and maintains the fundamental ontological divide that separates gods from humans.⁴¹ Its deeper significance lies in its capacity to translate into language the gap that separates the omniscient gods from humans with only partial knowledge. If the gods were to pass on their superior knowledge directly to humans – without casting it in the enigmatic mode – this divide would narrow. To close the gap separating humanity from divinity and to benefit from the superior vantage point of the gods, humans thus need to interpret the enigmatic divine words correctly. They need to transform the possibility of

⁴⁰ Hdt. 1.47.

⁴¹ On this point see also Vernant 1991b; Manetti 1993: 14–19.

multiple meanings in the divine utterance into a reference to something specific in the here and now of the human cosmos.

The oracle really draws attention to this aspect of human–divine communication when it reminds Croesus that divine knowledge is fundamentally different from human knowledge. Yet Croesus is unable to appreciate what oracles mean. The way he seeks to interact with Delphic Apollo during the oracle test proves exemplary for the way in which Herodotus presents all his later encounters with the supernatural: Croesus misreads every single prophecy he receives and does so consistently by overlooking the possibility that oracles speak to humans in the enigmatic mode. In his preference for the literal over the metaphorical and ambiguous, Herodotus' Croesus in effect turns a blind eye towards the ontological difference that separates humanity from divinity. It is at this point that Croesus' transgression of the supernatural, his *hybris*, becomes tangible.

Again, the result is a moralising historical narrative, highlighting the flaws in Croesus' interaction with the gods as a factor contributing to his downfall. Yet in contrast to the story of the Spartan Glaucus from the beginning of this chapter, the moral of the story is not spelt out by Herodotus but is implied in the storyline itself. The Croesus *logos* tells an extended oracle story and, in doing so, offers a powerful first character study in the *Histories* – one of many more to come.⁴² By developing the story of Croesus in so much detail, Herodotus sites part of the answer to why empires rise and fall on the human level: in the character of those in power.

Yet how representative is this for the way in which oracles and storytelling feature elsewhere in the *Histories*? At this stage one may be inclined to point out that the Croesus *logos* stands out in the context of the *Histories* not only for the number of oracles, prophecies and omens it includes, but also and in particular for the space Herodotus allows for the narrative to unfold.

⁴² For further character studies in the *Histories* see e.g. Hdt. 3.1–38 (on Cambyses) or Hdt. 7.5–20, 7.45–52, 7.101–4 etc. (on Xerxes).

While Herodotus develops in extraordinary detail the story of Croesus' various entanglements with oracles, predictions and omens, he does so for a reason. As I will show in the following section of this chapter, the Croesus *logos* sets up the way in which Herodotus uses oracle stories elsewhere in his work. If one extends the focus from the Croesus *logos* to the way in which oracles feature elsewhere in the *Histories*, it becomes clear that the story of Croesus really serves as a paradigmatic tale for the principles and practices of human–divine communication in the *Histories*.

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This perspective applies first and foremost to the role of the Croesus *logos* as a story about human–divine communication. As I have shown in the previous section, the Croesus *logos* demonstrates that special care is needed for humans to benefit from divine knowledge – a lesson Croesus learns too late, but of which the reader will remain acutely aware due to the prominent way it is set up in the beginning of the *Histories*.

A number of Delphic oracle stories later in the *Histories* reaffirm this lesson by applying it to contexts other than Croesus and the early history of Lydia. In book 4, for example, we encounter one Arcesilaus, a Cyrenean king in exile on the island of Samos, who enquires at Delphi about the possibility of returning to Cyrene.⁴³ (We will discuss the larger context in which this story is told in the next section of this chapter, when we consider the role of oracles in Herodotus' account of the founding of Cyrene.)⁴⁴ Arcesilaus faces the same kind of enigmatic prophecy that challenged Croesus. He receives a response that predicts his family will remain in power for eight generations but includes a personal warning for this Arcesilaus himself:

σύ μέντοι ἥσυχος εἶναι κατελθὼν ἐς τὴν σεωυτοῦ· ἦν δὲ τὴν κάμινον εὕρης πλέην ἀμφορέων, μὴ ἐξοπτήσης τοὺς ἀμφορέας ἀλλ' ἀπότημιπε κατ' οὖρον· εἰ δὲ

⁴³ Hdt. 4.163.

⁴⁴ For a discussion of questions of the authenticity and historicity of this oracle see Crahay 1956: 122–6; Parke and Wormell 1956, vol. 1: 155–7; Fontenrose 1978:

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ἐξοπτήσεις [τὴν κάμινον], μὴ ἐσέλθῃς ἐς τὴν ἀμφίρρυτον· εἰ δὲ μή, ἀποθανέαι καὶ αὐτός καὶ ταῦρος ὁ καλλιστεύων.

As for yourself, when you return to your country, be gentle. If you find the oven full of jars, do not bake them but send them off with the wind. But if you do heat the oven, enter not the land surrounded by water, for otherwise you will die, and the best of the bulls with you.⁴⁵

Like Croesus, Arcesilaus appreciates only that the Delphic response seems to endorse his plans to return to Cyrene, but disregards the warning. Like Croesus, he cannot see how the enigmatic words of the oracle apply to his own situation. And the consequences are even direr than for Croesus, who merely loses his power but remains alive to serve as a voice of reason later in the *Histories*.⁴⁶ Arcesilaus dies in Barca, a coastal town where he fled after having inadvertently ‘baked the pots in the oven’. After his return to Cyrene he had set fire to a tower in which his opponents had taken refuge, thus fulfilling the oracle’s warning.⁴⁷

This story again parades the ignorance of those in power about the principles and practices of human–divine communication. It showcases the ontological differences separating gods and humans that both make this communication worthwhile, but also call for special care in all human interaction with the gods. And, as in the story of Croesus, Herodotus does not formulate this insight as an abstract statement in his own voice, but resorts to narrative to relate it to his reader. He merely concludes, ‘So Arcesilaus whether he would or not, missed the meaning of the oracle and fulfilled his destiny’,⁴⁸ thus leaving it up to the reader to think about the specifics involved.

And Arcesilaus is certainly not the last of Herodotus’ historical characters who misunderstands the oracle and thus seals his own fate. The Siphnians make the same mistake when they

61, 207, 308. See Kirchberg 1965: 57–9 on the function of oracles in Herodotus’ account of Cyrene.

⁴⁵ Hdt. 4.163.

⁴⁶ See Hdt. 1.207 and 3.34.

⁴⁷ Hdt. 4.164.

⁴⁸ Hdt. 4.164.

fail to make sense of an enigmatic Delphic prediction foretelling the end of their prosperity:

ἀλλ' ὅταν ἐν Σίφνῳ πρυτανήια λευκὰ γένηται
 λεύκοφρὺς τ' ἀγορή, τότε δὴ δεῖ φράδμονος ἀνδρὸς
 φράσασθαι ξύλινόν τε λόχον κήρυκά τ' ἐρυθρόν.

When the council-chamber in Siphnos shines white,
 And white too is the brow of the market-place,
 Then is there need of a man of foresight to beware.
 Danger threatens from a wooden host and a scarlet messenger.⁴⁹

Like so many of Herodotus' historical characters, the Siphnians fail to understand what the oracle means.⁵⁰ The 'white brow' (λεύκοφρυς) refers to the fact that the market place had recently been adorned in white Parian marble and the 'wooden host' (ξύλινόν τε λόχον) and 'scarlet messenger' (κήρυκά τ' ἐρυθρόν) are the approaching Samian ships, which were painted in scarlet.⁵¹ Like Croesus, Arcesilaus and others, the Siphnians are unable to see what the divine words may refer to.

The story of the Spartan king Cleomenes alludes to the same pattern: Cleomenes kills some Argives who had fled into a small grove by piling wood around it and burning it to the ground.⁵² Only when it is too late (the grove is already on fire), he learns that the wood was sacred to Argos and concludes that the 'Argos' that Apollo once predicted he would take was not the city of Argos, as he had thought, but a wood of the same name.⁵³

Cleomenes' final words when he understands the oracle's real meaning recall Croesus' complaint at Delphi, who also accused Apollo of deceit:

ὦ Ἀπολλὼν χρηστήριε, ἣ μεγάλως με ἠπάτηκας φάμενος Ἄργος αἰρήσειν.
 συμβάλλομαι δ' ἐξήκειν μοι τὸ χρηστήριον.

⁴⁹ Hdt. 3.57.

⁵⁰ On this oracle see also Crahay 1956: 258–60; Parke and Wormell 1956, vol. 1: 150–2; Kirchberg 1965: 23–4; Fontenrose 1978: 65, 169, 306–7.

⁵¹ Hdt. 8.58.

⁵² See Hdt. 6.76–80.

⁵³ Hdt. 6.80. For a discussion of the historicity of this oracle see Crahay 1956: 169–71 and Scott 2005: 294–5 with further literature.

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O Apollo, God of prophecy, you did indeed deceive me when you said I should take Argos, for now I believe that your prophecy to me is fulfilled.⁵⁴

By including a number of narratives that, in effect, tell a similar story of errors in human–divine communication, various themes emerge throughout the *Histories*.⁵⁵ These themes revolve around differences in human and divine perspective, the capacity of language to refer to multiple phenomena in the world, and the resulting problems of human interpretation and understanding. The insight into the human condition these narratives convey is thus ultimately cumulative in nature: over the course of the *Histories*, Herodotus sketches a rich picture of how humans can go wrong in attempting to benefit from superior knowledge of the divine, as well as the reasons why.

One aspect of this use of the oracle in Herodotus' historical narrative is worth drawing out in more detail because it sheds light on further aspects of the link between oracles and storytelling in the *Histories*. In all the instances discussed above, the oracle serves as an authoritative voice, which helps the reader to gauge the limits of human knowledge and understanding. Yet the oracle also features as a voice of authority and legitimation in a number of other narratives. Overall, these tend to be shorter in length and revolve around different themes and problems to those of the Croesus *logos*, which, as I argued above, is in many ways a narrative *about* oracles and human relations to the supernatural.

The *Histories*, for example, include two narratives in which the oracle features as an authoritative voice explaining the presence of certain statues in the Greek poleis of Metapontum and Epidaurus respectively.⁵⁶ In the first tale, the Metapontines were once visited by Aristean of Proconnesus, who instructed

⁵⁴ Hdt. 6.80. For the Croesus *logos* passage in which the oracle is accused of deceit see Hdt. 1.90–1.

⁵⁵ See also Hdt. 9.33 in which Teisamenus receives a response telling him that he 'will win the five greatest contests' (ἀγῶνας τοὺς μεγίστους ἀναρῆσεσθαι πέντε), which he takes to refer to athletic competitions. The difference here is that the Spartans by now seem to have learnt what oracles mean. They interpret the oracle to refer to five great battles and ultimately convince Teisamenus to support their cause by acting as their diviner.

⁵⁶ Hdt. 4.15 and 5.82, respectively.

them to set up an altar to Apollo and a statue of himself beside it.⁵⁷ When the Metapontines enquire at Delphi about this, they were told to follow his instructions for their own benefit – whereupon, as Herodotus tells us, they set up the statue which was still there in his own day, next to a statue of Apollo.⁵⁸

The second story is set at Epidauros.⁵⁹ It is considerably longer and explains the origins of the hostilities between the Aeginetans and the Athenians.⁶⁰ The oracle features only in the first part of the narrative, which tells the story of how the Epidaurians came to have statues of Damia and Auxesia (two Greek heroines associated with fertility) which play a crucial role in later history. Apparently, the Epidaurians once suffered crop failure. Facing this threat to their existence, they consult the oracle about what to do and receive the response that they should set up images of Damia and Auxesia. In this instance, however, the oracle's instructions go beyond the mere order to set up statues: for when they ask a follow-up question – whether the statues should be crafted out of bronze or stone – the oracle apparently instructed them to use the wood of a cultivated olive tree (ξύλου ἡμέρης ἐλαίης) instead. The Epidaurians then ask the Athenians for permission to use particularly sacred Athenian olive trees for this purpose; the Athenians grant this right in exchange for the promise of annual offerings to Athena and Erechtheus.⁶¹

Yet the story is not over. Once the origin and nature of the statues has been explained with the help of the Delphic oracle, Herodotus goes on to tell us what role they came to play in the subsequent history of Epidauros.⁶² Apparently, the Aeginetans steal the statues and move them to Aegina, where they become the focus of a local cult. With the statues

⁵⁷ On this story see also Crahay 1956: 73–5; Parke and Wormell 1956, vol. 1: 352–3; Kirchberg 1965: 40; Fontenrose 1978: 323.

⁵⁸ Hdt. 4.15.

⁵⁹ Hdt. 5.82. For a discussion of the historicity and authenticity of this story see also Crahay 1956: 75–7; Parke and Wormell 1956, vol. 1: 345–6; Fontenrose 1978: 288–9. See Kirchberg 1965: 80 on Herodotus' account of this oracle.

⁶⁰ On Damia and Auxesia, see *LIMC* III: 323–4.

⁶¹ Hdt. 5.82.

⁶² Hdt. 5.83–9.

no longer in their possession, the Epidaurians cease to provide the promised annual offerings to the Athenians. In return, the Athenians send a trireme to Aegina to bring back the statues on the grounds that they were crafted from Athenian wood. Once there, the Athenians find themselves unable to move the statues from their mountings. When they try to do so by force, a number of (super-)natural occurrences (thunder, earthquakes) intervene until a strange onset of madness causes the Athenians to slay each other until only one is left to return home.⁶³

We do not need to follow the course of the story any further.⁶⁴ We have already seen in this and previous examples how oracles are intrinsically tied up with storytelling. The oracle as a voice of authority and legitimation continues to speak to us beyond the Croesus *logos* and the story it tells about the principles and practices of human–divine communication. Delphi serves as a reference point in many shorter narratives that Herodotus included in his account to highlight how firmly the human cosmos is grounded in a deeper divine order.

Further instances in which the oracle authorises even more weighty matters than the crafting of statues feature throughout the *Histories*: Delphi is also invoked as an authority in contexts of murder, bloodshed and revenge. The first instance of the oracle speaking to these issues occurs in book 1. In a short narrative the oracular voice instigates the regular celebration of funeral games as recompense for a crime.⁶⁵ The oracle features as an advocate for justice again later in book 2 when Herodotus refers to it as the reason why the people of Delphi asked someone to claim recompense for the murder of the late poet Aesop.⁶⁶ The adequate compensation for a crime also features in the last oracle story of the *Histories*, in which the oracle demands that the people of Apollonia pay a certain Euenius whatever he wishes as recompense for having

⁶³ Hdt. 5.85.

⁶⁴ In addition to this Athenian version of events, Herodotus also includes a second, Aeginetan, version in which the statues again feature prominently. See Hdt. 5.86.

⁶⁵ Hdt. 1.167.

⁶⁶ Hdt. 2.134.

blinded him unjustly.⁶⁷ In all these examples, the oracle acts as an authoritative voice that intervenes as a facilitator of order, justice and balance – all larger themes of the *Histories* – and it does so through narratives in which the moral order is temporarily disturbed.

Yet it is not only the moral order that comes into focus in Delphic oracle stories: the political order, too, features prominently. In book 4, the oracle is said to have advised the people of Cyrene to appoint a man from Mantinea in Arcadia, in effect endorsing Demonax and his political reforms.⁶⁸ In contrast to this relatively straightforward example, the prophecies concerning another tyrant, Cypselus of Corinth, are more difficult to assess. Herodotus' account of Cypselus includes multiple prophecies from Delphi, announcing his rule before his birth and finally also predicting the end of his dynasty two generations later.⁶⁹ His narrative, for example, includes the famous response apparently delivered to Eetion, soon to become the father of Cypselus:

Ἡετίων, οὗτις σε τίει πολύτιτον ἔοντα.
 Λάβδρα κύει, τέξει δ' ὀλοοίτροχον· ἐν δὲ πεσεῖται
 ἀνδράσι μουνάρχοισι, δικαίωσει δὲ Κόρινθον.

Eetion, yet high honour is thine, though honour'd thou art not.
 Labda conceiveth anon; and a rolling rock she shall bear thee,
 Fated on princes to fall, and execute justice on Corinth.⁷⁰

Herodotus ends up drawing a dark picture of the harsh rule of Cypselus and of his son Periander at Corinth. Cypselus himself is said to have killed, banished and deprived many Corinthians of their riches; his son Periander was apparently even worse.⁷¹ Yet, we may wonder: how do the oracles fit into the picture, in particular the early ones allegedly delivered

⁶⁷ Hdt. 9.93–4. Ultimately this is an aetiological story which explains why a certain Deiphonius became seer of the Greeks. See Griffiths 1999 for a superb interpretation of this story. See also Burkert 2007.

⁶⁸ Hdt. 4.161.

⁶⁹ Hdt. 5.92. The bibliography on Herodotus' account of Cypselus is substantial. See for example Parke and Wormell 1956, vol. 1: 115–17; Fontenrose 1978: 116–19, 287–8; Gray 1996; Moles 2007; Hall 2013: 137–43.

⁷⁰ Hdt. 5.92.β.

⁷¹ See Hdt. 5.92.ζ.

before Cypselus was born. Is the oracle quoted above actually favourable to Cypselus? Or does Herodotus include it because it already foreshadows the violence to come? Such questions matter not only in the context of Herodotean historiography and its stance towards different individuals and the political systems they represent, but they are also discussed in the scholarly literature with regard to Delphi's role as a religious institution in the political landscape of archaic and classical Greece beyond the *Histories*.⁷²

Again, the point here is not to pass judgement on the veracity of any of these stories, but merely to show how intrinsically the oracular voice is bound up with the narrative context in which it is presented. Perhaps the ambiguity of the oracle's stance towards Cypselus' reign is there for a reason – to reflect the ambiguity inherent in the rule of tyrants.⁷³ Herodotus could have stated in his own voice that the oracle did or did not endorse a certain person, political order or solution to conflict. Yet in none of the examples discussed above does he choose to do so. In the case of Cypselus, at least, he may have on purpose left open where the oracle stands. And, again, it is the medium of narrative and storytelling that allows him to do so: letting the oracle speak for itself without his direct authorial intervention, which would have required him to take a stance.

One more example here will allow me to explain what the storytelling aspect adds to the picture. In book 6 Herodotus includes a story about the origins of double kingship at Sparta.⁷⁴ Apparently the Spartan queen Argeia once gave birth to twins. As the father died shortly afterwards, the Spartans decided to follow their tradition and make the older one their new king. However, the boy's mother refused to say which one was born first and took great care to always treat both boys equally, so that nobody could guess which was older. At a loss about what to do

⁷² On this question see e.g. Waters 1971; Hart 1982: 76–8 and 233–6 (with further literature); Gammie 1986.

⁷³ It has been pointed out by Maurizio 2001: 43 that there seems to be a direct link between the ambiguity in these prophecies and the ambiguous nature of tyranny itself when it comes to the question of origins and legitimacy.

⁷⁴ Hdt. 6.52.

the Spartans resort to the Delphic oracle for advice. The Pythia, however, decides to help fulfil the mother's plan and instructs them to make both boys king.⁷⁵

The story explains, endorses and legitimises the Spartan institution of double kingship – an oddity among the Greek monarchies – and again, as in the examples discussed above, it does not rely on the historian's authority and credibility to do so. Instead, it draws on a divine voice, which allows the reader to marvel at the mother's dilemma, her cunning, resolve and ultimate success in making both boys king. The account of the origins of the double kingship at Sparta reflects a deeply human touch. The story also raises the question of the legitimacy of this arrangement only to answer it immediately through the oracle's intervention.

The two instances when Herodotus tells of the oracle having been instigated to deliver a certain prophecy to someone in particular belong in this context.⁷⁶ Apparently Cleomenes once instigated the Pythia with the help of one Cobon, an influential person at Delphi, to respond to an enquiry by Demaratus that he was not the son of Ariston.⁷⁷ Herodotus mentions the bribery of the Pythia by Cobon merely in passing, noting that 'he influenced (ἀναπειθεῖ, 'influenced', 'convinced') Perialla the prophetess to give the answer Cleomenes wanted'.⁷⁸ A little later in book 6 the Alcmaeonids are likewise said to have 'influenced' (ἀναπεισαντες) the Pythia to tell all Spartans consulting her to end the Pisistratid tyranny at Athens. Herodotus concludes his account of this incident rather matter-of-factly when he states: 'the Alcmaeonids did, in plain fact, actually bring about the liberation – provided that what I said further back is true, namely that it was the Alcmaeonids who influenced the Delphic priestess to keep on telling the Spartans that they must set Athens free'.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ For a discussion of the authenticity and historicity of this oracle see Crahay 1956: 159–60; Parke and Wormell 1956, vol. 1: 84; Fontenrose 1978: 406–7. On Herodotus' account of this oracle see also Kirchberg 1965: 59–60.

⁷⁶ See Hdt. 6.66 and 5.90/6.123 respectively with Scott 2005: 269–70 and 413 (suggesting that at least in the latter instance this 'convincing' involved outright bribery).

⁷⁷ Hdt. 6.66.

⁷⁸ Hdt. 6.66.

⁷⁹ Hdt. 6.123, referring to a similarly brief comment of his at 5.90.

The Foundation of Cyrene

Whatever the veracity of these incidents – again it is possible to speculate endlessly about the historical background to Herodotus’ information here⁸⁰ – at least in the context of the *Histories*, the scandal resulting from the manipulation of the Pythia to speak up in favour of one’s own cause gains true currency against the backdrop of the oracular as an authoritative voice elsewhere in Herodotus’ account. Its scandalous force becomes tangible particularly if we read it against the various attempts by individuals in the *Histories* to instrumentalise the supernatural for their own purposes.

Both examples stand out for the brevity and matter-of-fact style in which they report what must have been unthinkable – the bribery of the highest religious authority in the ancient world. That the oracle is denied a voice in each of Herodotus’ two accounts of oracular manipulation – here he *did* choose to state the fact himself, without giving the words of the oracle – is no coincidence; nor is the fact that for once there is no story here. Moreover, by giving the Pythia a name in at least one of these stories Herodotus draws attention away from the divine and towards the human side of oracles, thus preserving the divine voice which speaks as an authority elsewhere in the work. All this is in direct and meaningful contrast to the norm prevailing elsewhere in the *Histories*.

The Foundation of Cyrene

So far we have looked at the way in which the oracle features as an authoritative voice that speaks through narrative in evaluative contexts that warrant an authority larger than that of the historian. I have argued that this role of the oracle was first introduced in the Croesus *logos*, which, in many ways, serves as a paradigmatic tale about human–divine communication. In the previous section I have shown that this role of the oracle extends beyond the history of Lydia to a number of contexts involving the moral or political order. It is time to

⁸⁰ Again see the commentary by Scott 2010: 410–14 with further literature.

broaden our focus again and consider how the oracular voice speaks through narrative and storytelling more widely in the *Histories*, for example in Herodotus' account of the founding of Cyrene.⁸¹

A number of points I have already made about the centrality of narrative and storytelling in how oracles obtain meaning in the *Histories* apply to the account of Cyrene's foundation. This too is an aetiological story, which conveys legitimacy to the new settlement by linking it to the authority of the Delphic oracle. The story relates how the people of Thera came to found a colony in North Africa under the leadership of a certain Battus.

Herodotus' account of the founding of Cyrene is second only to the Croesus *logos* in its reliance on oracles to move the narrative along. We do not need to recount the story in detail here, merely to draw attention to its basic structure: the narrative contains no fewer than eight Delphic oracles.⁸² It comes in two parts: part one, containing six prophecies, tells the story of the circumstances leading up to the foundation of Cyrene and encompasses a Thera and a Cyrenean tradition.⁸³ Part two contains two further prophecies and tells us about the political transformations in the new colony under different kings in the first few generations immediately after its foundation.⁸⁴ The second part of the story includes the oracle advising the Cyreneans to bring in a man from Mantinea in Arcadia as well as the prophecy given to Arcesilaus discussed above, warning him not to bake the pots in the oven.⁸⁵

Narrative and storytelling are first flagged as themes when Herodotus introduces the Thera tradition with the kind of reference to sources familiar from other sections of the *Histories*: μέχρι μὲν νυν τούτου τοῦ λόγου Λακεδαιμόνιοι Θηραίοισι κατὰ ταῦτὰ λέγουσι, τὸ δὲ ἀπὸ τούτου μῶνοι Θηραῖοι

⁸¹ For a discussion of Herodotus' account of the foundation of Cyrene in the context of other foundation stories featuring Delphic prophecies see Parke and Wormell 1956, vol. 1: 73–9; Fontenrose 1978: 120–3, 234, 283–5.

⁸² See Hdt. 4.150, 4.151, 4.155–6, 4.156, 4.157, 4.159, 4.161 and 4.163.

⁸³ Hdt. 4.150–8.

⁸⁴ Hdt. 4.159–67.

⁸⁵ Hdt. 4.161 and 4.163, respectively.

ὥδε γενέσθαι λέγουσι, ‘Up to this point the Lacedaemonians and the Therans tell the same story; what follows is on the authority of the latter only.’⁸⁶ This is echoed a little later, when Herodotus sets out to tell the second, Cyrenean, tradition of how Battus came to found Cyrene: ταῦτα δὲ Θηραῖοι λέγουσι, τὰ δ’ ἐπίλοιπα τοῦ λόγου συμφέρονται ἤδη Θηραῖοι Κυρηναίοισι, ‘I have related the foregoing on the authority of the Therans only; for the sequel, the people of Cyrene are in agreement with them.’⁸⁷

Herodotus here emphasises that he relies on a story told by those directly involved in the events. By introducing the theme of narrative and storytelling so prominently into his account he puts the focus squarely on similarities and differences between both traditions.

Much has been said about Herodotus’ account of the foundation of Cyrene and its variant traditions in the *Histories* and Pindar.⁸⁸ Some scholars, most notably Irad Malkin, have taken it as a prime example of the oracle’s role in instigating the foundation of a new city.⁸⁹ Others have interpreted the evidence in the opposite way, suggesting that it is largely or wholly fictional.⁹⁰ I wish not to extend these debates here, but to draw attention to a particular aspect of that part of the narrative which tells of events leading up to the foundation of Cyrene: the Cyrenean and the Theran traditions differ in their sketch of the role of the Delphic oracle in events leading to the foundation of the city. The Theran tradition puts the focus

⁸⁶ Hdt. 4.150. Source references in the *Histories*: Lateiner 1989: 76–90.

⁸⁷ Hdt. 4.154.

⁸⁸ See Pi. *P.* 4.4–8, 5.85–95 with Dougherty 1993a: 136–56. On Herodotus’ account of the foundation of Cyrene see also Crahay 1956: 110–33; Parke and Wormell 1956, vol. 1: 73–9; Kirchberg 1965: 51–8; Calame 1990, 2009: 149–75; Mitchell 2002; Malkin 2003. On the intersection between foundation narratives and Delphic oracle stories see also Giertz 1971: 54–115, in particular 62–115 (‘Delphische Orakelgeschichten’); Dougherty 1992, 1993a, 1993b. For a discussion of the historicity of this and other foundation stories in general works on the Archaic period see e.g. Osborne 1996: 8–15; Hall 2013: 100–6.

⁸⁹ See Malkin 1987: 60–9, who also offers detailed references for different scholarly positions on the historicity of foundation narratives (and the oracles they include) beyond Herodotus (see 17–22).

⁹⁰ See e.g. Crahay 1956: 110–33; Fontenrose 1978: 283–85 (Q45–51), 308 (Q119) also refers to the oracles as ‘not genuine’. See also Fehling 1971: 157, 160.

more firmly on the Delphic initiative in moving events along, while the Cyrenean tradition presents the fates of the individuals in the story as being already foretold by their names.

The Thera Tradition

The role of the oracle in developing the story emerges first and forcefully with the delivery of a spontaneous oracle ordering the foundation of a city in Libya. When King Grinnus of Thera visited the oracle to enquire about another matter, the Pythia tells him to found a city in Libya. Grinnus complains that this is not feasible due to his advanced age and asks the oracle to send a young man instead, pointing to Battus.⁹¹

After their return to Thasos, the Therans do not act – not knowing where Libya lies. Yet the story is not over yet, for the oracle intervenes again: when the Therans, after seven years of severe drought, again send to Delphi the Pythia reminds them in no uncertain terms that they *must* found a colony in Libya.⁹²

The remainder of the story then focuses on the various setbacks the Therans suffer until they are finally able to establish the new settlement.⁹³ At first, they send envoys to Crete to see whether anyone there may have any knowledge of Libya and, indeed, they find one Corobius, a purple fisher, who had once visited the island of Platea, just off the Libyan coast. They hire Corobius to guide them to Platea. A small delegation leaves Thera, finds the island and returns to Thera to report the news. Corobius is left behind on Platea with enough provisions to survive until the arrival of further Thera backup.

Yet things do not work out entirely according to plan: the Therans are unable to return to the island before Corobius' provisions run out and the purple fisher is saved from starvation only by the chance arrival of a Samian ship, blown off course on its way to Egypt.⁹⁴ The limits of human planning

⁹¹ Hdt. 4.150.

⁹² Hdt. 4.151.

⁹³ Hdt. 4.151–3.

⁹⁴ Hdt. 4.152.

and forethought again emerge forcefully in the course of the narrative when we hear that the Samian ship that provided Corobius with fresh provisions sailed off to Egypt: ‘Easterly winds, however, prevented them from getting there, and continued so long that they were driven away to the westward right through the Pillars of Heracles until, by a piece of divine luck (θείη πομπή χρεώμενοι), they succeeded in making Tartessus.’⁹⁵

The Theran tradition thus puts the focus squarely on the obstacles humans face when trying to take things into their own hands. At the same time, there is a strong emphasis on the intervention of Delphi. The hesitant human actions and the role of chance in human history are in direct contrast to the decisive role of the oracle, which repeatedly reminds the Therans of what is fated to them, thus helping move the story along.

The Cyrenean Tradition

The Cyrenean tradition puts the focus differently. This tradition starts from a touching story concerning Battus’ mother. As a child, she is almost murdered at the request of her own father. She survives only because a stranger feels pity for her and takes her to his home town of Thera. At Thera she eventually becomes involved with a distinguished citizen, falls pregnant and gives birth to a son with a speech defect, ‘τῷ οὖνομα ἐτέθη Βάττος, ὡς Θηραῖοι τε καὶ Κυρηναῖοι λέγουσι, ‘and this child – according, at any rate, to what is said at Thera and Cyrene – was called Battus’.⁹⁶

So far, so good: after all, the Greek stem *batt-* means ‘stammer’, so the boy’s name seems an apposite if unflattering description of its bearer. At this point, however, in an instance

⁹⁵ Hdt. 4.152. Herodotus here seems to indicate that good luck and fortune is at play in the events he describes. Cf. his use of θείη τύχη, θείη πομπή and other similar formulations in other sections of the *Histories*: 1.62, 1.126, 3.77, 3.139, 4.9, 5.92.γ, 7.16, 8.94 and 9.57.

⁹⁶ Hdt. 4.155.

of direct authorial intervention into the flow of the narrative, Herodotus states:

ὥς μέντοι ἐγὼ δοκέω, ἄλλο τι Βάττος δὲ μετωνομάσθη, ἐπεῖτε ἐς Λιβύην ἀπῖκετο, ἀπὸ τε τοῦ χρηστηρίου τοῦ γενομένου ἐν Δελφοῖσι αὐτῷ καὶ ἀπὸ τῆς τιμῆς τὴν ἔσχε τὴν ἐπωνυμίην ποιούμενος. Λίβυες γὰρ βασιλέα βάττον καλέουσι, καὶ τούτου εἵνεκα δοκέω θεσπίζουσιν τὴν Πυθίην καλέσαι μιν Λιβυκῇ γλώσσῃ, εἰδυῖαν ὡς βασιλεὺς ἔσται ἐν Λιβύῃ.

My own view, however, is that he was never known as Battus until after he went to Libya, where he assumed the name in consequence of the words spoken by the Delphic oracle, and of the high position he held there – for ‘battus’ in the Libyan language means ‘king’, and that, I fancy, is why the Priestess at Delphi, when she spoke the prophecy, addressed him by the Libyan word, knowing as she did that he was to become a king in Libya.⁹⁷

Herodotus is quick to supply us with the story itself: apparently, as a young man, this ‘Battus’ (or whatever he was called then)⁹⁸ consults the Delphic oracle about his stammering and receives the following response:

Βάττ’, ἐπὶ φωνὴν ἦλθες· ἀναξ δέ σε Φοῖβος Ἀπόλλων
ἐς Λιβύην πέμπει μηλοτρόφον οἰκιστῆρα.

O Battus, for a voice you came; but the lord Apollo
Sends you to Libya, nurse of flocks, to build a city.⁹⁹

As Herodotus further explains, the Pythia was actually saying, ‘O King for a voice you came’, a point which was apparently lost on the human protagonists in the story, including Battus himself, who, like so many other protagonists of oracle stories, can discern only the obvious meaning of the prophecy: the reference to the stammering.¹⁰⁰

Herodotus thus corrects a particular detail in the way the Cyreneans tell the story. What Herodotus is saying here is that Battus at first was not known to the Greeks as baby Battus. He obtained this name only *after* he received an oracle addressing him as Battus, went to Libya and founded the city of Cyrene.

⁹⁷ Hdt. 4.155.

⁹⁸ His real name was probably Aristoteles, see Pi. P. 5.85ff. with How and Wells 1912, vol. 1: 352.

⁹⁹ Hdt. 4.155.

¹⁰⁰ Hdt. 4.155.

Herodotus is suggesting that the people of Cyrene, from whom he heard the story, renamed its main protagonist to give the boy the name that he actually adopted only later in life. This is an insightful and revealing comment about the dynamics of storytelling by someone who is himself deeply involved in the telling of stories. Does Herodotus here reflect on his own experience of shaping and reshaping Delphic oracle stories?¹⁰¹ Whatever may be the case, Herodotus' authorial intervention emphatically endorses the Pythia's capacity to recognise a destiny already spelled out in a name.

As in so many other oracle stories in the *Histories* and elsewhere in Greek thought and literature, the focus is firmly on what the oracle means. Again the language of the oracle is presented in its capacity to refer to multiple realities. The name 'Battus' features as an over-determined signifier that brackets both past and present. It describes the reality of the stammering enquirer *and* his future role as king.

Words and their meaning, in particular the meaning of names and their relationship to the human cosmos, become an issue here as they do in the traditional narrative of city foundations, but in a different way. In other stories that have come down to us, it is the location of the new settlement that is cast in enigmatic terms.¹⁰² Here it is the name of the *oikistēs* himself which assumes multiple meanings. Herodotus knows the traditional pattern of foundation narratives – he follows it himself in another narrative a little earlier on in the *Histories*, in which the Phocaeans misinterpret the oracle telling them to found Cynus (the prediction refers to a hero of the same name, not the island).¹⁰³ In his account of Cyrene's foundation, however, he obviously chose another route to put the focus squarely on the figure of the *oikistēs*.

Other differences to the traditional oracle story emerge in the further course of this particular tradition:¹⁰⁴ usually an enigmatic prophecy is resolved in the moment it receives a definite

¹⁰¹ See Maurizio 1997 on the shaping of Delphic oracle stories through their oral and literary transmission more generally.

¹⁰² See in detail Dougherty 1993b: 45–60 with examples.

¹⁰³ See Hdt. 1.167 and (in passing) 1.165 with Malkin 1987: 23–4.

¹⁰⁴ For other references to Delphi's intervention in city foundations see Hdt. 5.43 and 6.34.

meaning in the human world; in this instance, the enigma emerges only in hindsight, to the historian who is able to point it out to us. Herodotus here interprets a Delphic prophecy for us, and the act of interpretation involves translating an existing signifier from one language/symbolic system into another. The cross-cultural encounter involved in the establishment of this particular Greek settlement in North Africa is thus already ingrained in the name of the *oikistēs*, meaningful in both the original Greek *and* in the new Libyan context.

The second, Cyrenean version of the story, then, presents the fate of the individuals in the story being already written into their names. Here it is the role of the oracle not to help move the story along, but to recognise a preordained destiny, to alert humans in the story (and the reader) to it through divine signs, and thus to help steer the course of human history towards its preordained end. Between them, the Theran and the Cyrenean traditions of the events leading up to the foundation of Cyrene thus not only complement each other in terms of the story they tell about the foundation of a new settlement, but they also map out the ways in which fate and human agency complement each other in human history and the oracle's role in making this fate manifest.

Fighting Wars and Telling Oracle Stories

In the final section of this chapter we consider how Delphic oracles feature in the last three books of the *Histories*. The focus is now directly on the military confrontation between Greek and Persian forces as reflected in the kind of responses included in this part of the *Histories*.¹⁰⁵ With one exception – the story about Euenius already mentioned, which is told as part of an aetiological digression – all oracles featuring in books 7 (six oracles), 8 (four oracles) and 9 (three oracles) directly concern the Persian Wars.¹⁰⁶ Even though we have now

¹⁰⁵ Herodotus and the Persian invasion of Greece: Harrison 2002.

¹⁰⁶ See also Crahay 1956: 290–342; Parke and Wormell 1956, vol. 1: 165–79; Kirchberg 1965: 84–111 on Delphic oracles pertaining to the Persian invasion of Greece (including those recorded by Herodotus).

moved firmly into the domain of history, I will show that here, too, narrative and storytelling are key to understanding how these prophecies work.

The oracles featured in Herodotus' historical sections do not speak to marginal occurrences at the sidelines of the war, but concern its key events and major turning points. The naval battle of Salamis, for example, is highlighted by several prophecies from Delphi. Before the battle, the Athenians consult Delphi and ultimately receive an enigmatic response featuring a 'wooden wall', which is famously interpreted by Themistocles to refer to ships (see below).¹⁰⁷

Two oracles also bracket another significant turning point in the war: the death of the Spartan king Leonidas. The first prophecy sets up the reader's expectation of what is to follow: before the event the Spartans are advised that either their city would be destroyed or they would lose a king.¹⁰⁸ After Leonidas' heroic death the Spartans receive another oracle telling them to ask Xerxes to pay a blood price and to accept whatever he was prepared to give. Xerxes' response – laughter – is in line with that of other individuals in power and a sign of their impending downfall.¹⁰⁹ His prediction – that they will receive the satisfaction they deserve from the Persian commander Mardonius – is very much in line with the arrogant behaviour already encountered in other doomed leaders. The prediction is fulfilled in book 9 of the *Histories* in a much more literal way than intended, when Mardonius is killed by a Spartan at Platea. Herodotus' authorial comment succinctly summarises the moral of the oracle story: ἐνθαῦτα ἢ τε δίκη τοῦ φόνου τοῦ Λεωνίδεω κατὰ τὸ χρηστήριον τὸ τοῖσι Σπαρτιήτησι <γενόμενον> ἐκ Μαρδονίου ἐπετελέετο, 'Thus the prophecy given

¹⁰⁷ Hdt. 7.140–3. The battle and its aftermath also provide the context of another oracle story (Hdt. 8.121–2), albeit this one can hardly be considered central in any way: after their victory, some Greeks apparently enquired at Delphi whether the first fruits they had offered from the spoils of the battle were sufficient. They were told that in general the god was happy with what he had received from everybody except the Aeginetans (who quickly act upon receiving this oracle by setting up three precious golden stars on a bronze mast, still seen by Herodotus himself).

¹⁰⁸ Hdt. 7.220.

¹⁰⁹ Hdt. 8.114.

to the Spartans was fulfilled, and Mardonius rendered satisfaction for the killing of Leonidas.¹¹⁰ Herodotus' comment closes the bracket between prediction and fulfilment and ties together a substantial section of his account.

In all these examples, the telling of oracle stories helps Herodotus to focus his historical narrative on key events, to add narrative depth to the events of the war and to retain a divine presence on the battlefield. This raises a fundamental question about Herodotus' use of oracles throughout the *Histories*: do oracles, as presented by Herodotus, merely predict what the gods know is going to happen? Or do they have a more active role in bringing about events? This question not only matters in the context of individual examples, it also plays a key role in our understanding of how causation works in the *Histories* more generally. It is of relevance to our understanding of the historical sections of the *Histories* in which Herodotus relates the Persian Wars.

So what picture does Herodotus' account sketch in this respect? The story about Teisamenos, who was told by the oracle that he would 'win five very great contests' (ἀγῶνας τοὺς μεγίστους ἀναιρήσεσθαι πέντε), can serve as a first example here.¹¹¹ Of course the story's ultimate purpose is to explain how a certain Teisamenos became the seer of the Greeks. Yet at the same time, the narrative also encourages us to see the Persian Wars as a succession of five great battles, which are compared to athletic contests (games) because Teisamenos himself misinterprets the oracle in this way.¹¹² In this story, at least, there is nothing to suggest that the oracles (or, indeed, the god that speaks through them) are in any way involved in making events happen as they do. There is, however, a strong sense that the oracle already knows what is going to happen when the prophecy is delivered, a knowledge that the humans in the story can grasp only through trial and error and at the moment it becomes lived reality.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ See Hdt. 9.64.

¹¹¹ Hdt. 9.33. On this story see also Crahay 1956: 102–4; Parke and Wormell 1956, vol. 1: 183–4; Kirchberg 1965: 109–10; Fontenrose 1978: 321, 220.

¹¹² Hdt. 9.33.

¹¹³ In this respect, this story reverberates with the famous passage in the Croesus *logos* mentioned above, in which the oracle responds to Croesus' complaint that it was able only to postpone what was anyway fated. See Hdt. 1.91.

Herodotus' account of the Persian attack on the Delphic oracle (which probably relies on a Delphic tradition) puts the focus slightly differently but does so in a way that does not fundamentally conflict with the point that oracles predict rather than cause.¹¹⁴ Herodotus introduces the story with the people of Delphi consulting the oracle about whether or not to bury the sanctuary's legendary treasures. They are advised not to do so as the god was able to look after himself. With the reader's interest now firmly set up, the focus of the narrative shifts to the details of this divine self-defence.

The following narrative features several astonishing incidents of divine intervention: the Persian army is 'greeted' by the sight of divine weapons (which, as Herodotus is quick to tell us, 'no human hand may touch'), thunderbolts and rocks crashing down from Mt Parnassus and a battle cry emerging from the temple. As if all this were not enough to cause panic among the Persian soldiers, they are fully defeated by two oversize hoplites (δύο γὰρ ὀπλίτας μεζόνως ἢ κατὰ ἀνθρώπων φύσιν ἔχοντας), the local heroes Phylacus and Autonus.¹¹⁵ With their intervention the story is complete and Herodotus introduces his own persona and credibility as a researcher to convey substance to what reads like a fantastic account: the rocks that had tumbled down on the Persian soldiers were still visible in his own day.¹¹⁶

The story conveys a strong sense of divine presence in the human realm and of divine intervention in human events. Not only are there direct interventions of the supernatural (in the form of the two heroes making an entrance on the battlefield), there are also a number of ways in which the supernatural manifests indirectly, for example weapons miraculously appearing in front of the temple, a battle cry emerging from it and, finally, rocks that fall on the Persian soldiers.

¹¹⁴ Hdt. 8.36. Herodotus mentions at 8.38 and 8.39 that he relies on Delphic traditions here.

¹¹⁵ Hdt. 8.38.

¹¹⁶ Hdt. 8.39.

Throughout his account of Delphi's self-defence Herodotus is careful to separate the voice of the oracle from physical interventions of the supernatural: while the oracle again merely predicts what it knows will happen, other representations of the supernatural intervene directly in the course of events. This division of roles is, I would suggest, by no means accidental. Herodotus uses the storytelling mode to keep both his own analytical voice and the authoritative voice of the oracle separate from the principles and practices of divine intervention in the human sphere. He thus preserves those voices for the numerous ways in which they comment on past, present and future events throughout the *Histories* without, however, being themselves directly involved in the shaping of the events related to us.

If we now think that Herodotus' Delphi was partial to or favoured the Greek cause, we would be mistaken. The *Histories* also feature a number of other oracles which seem to paint a much darker picture of Greece's future. A whole cluster of shorter oracle stories reflect the difficulties of decision-making by smaller Greek communities – whether to submit to the approaching Persian forces, join the Greek contingent or stay neutral. And the responses they allegedly received from Delphi are hardly encouraging.

This oracle is what the Argives heard upon consulting Delphi about the best course of action:¹¹⁷

ἐχθρὲ περικτιόνεσσι, φίλ' ἀθανάτοισι θεοῖσι,
εἴσω τὸν προβόλαιον ἔχων πεφυλαγμένος ἦσο
καὶ κεφαλὴν πεφύλαξο· κάρη δὲ τὸ σῶμα σώσσει.

Loathed by your neighbors, dear to the immortal gods,
Hold your javelin within and sit keeping your guard.
Guard the head well, and the head will save the body.¹¹⁸

Even though the prophecy seemed to warn them not to join the confederacy, the Argives at first considered doing so anyway on

¹¹⁷ On this oracle see also Crahay 1956: 321–4; Parke and Wormell 1956, vol. 1: 165–6; Kirchberg 1965: 96–7; Fontenrose 1978: 128, 220, 315–16.

¹¹⁸ Hdt. 7.148. For another oracle allegedly delivered to the Argives see Hdt. 6.19 and 77.2.

the condition that they obtain a thirty-year truce with Sparta and share the leadership of the confederacy on equal terms. When the Spartans deny these requests, the Argives decide they would rather risk coming under Persian rule.¹¹⁹

A little later in the *Histories*, the Cretans enquire at Delphi about the same issue and receive an equally discouraging response:

ὦ νήπιοι, ἐπιμέμφεσθε ὅσα ὑμῖν ἐκ τῶν Μενέλεω τιμωρημάτων Μίνως ἔπεμψε μηνίων δακρύματα; ὅτε οἱ μὲν οὐ συνεξεπρήξαντο αὐτῷ τὸν ἐν Καμικῷ θάνατον γεγόμενον, ὑμεῖς δὲ ἐκείνοισι τὴν ἐκ Σπάρτης ἀρπασθεῖσαν ὑπ' ἀνδρὸς βαρβάρου γυναικα.

Foolish men, do you not still resent all the tears which Minos in his anger caused you to weep after you helped Menelaus? Was he not angry because the Greeks did not help you to avenge his death at Camicus, whereas you did help them to avenge the rape by a foreign prince of a woman from Sparta?¹²⁰

Upon hearing this prophecy, the Cretans decide not to join the Greek alliance.¹²¹

Given the strong sense of doom contained in such prophecies, some scholars have suggested that the Pythia actually sided with the Persians. In particular, older scholarship has sometimes argued that the Pythia was ‘medising’ (propagating a pro-Persian attitude).¹²² Yet such suggestions are problematic at best. Again they are based on speculative assumptions about what really happened at Delphi (see [chapter 1](#)). It is actually much more productive to explore how the oracles work as part of narratives that reflect the difficult situation of the Greek poleis in northern Greece in particular. Moreover, the Persians themselves received their fair share of dreadful oracles, including the Delphic prediction that if they entered Hellas, they would conquer Delphi and subsequently be destroyed.¹²³

¹¹⁹ Hdt. 7.149.

¹²⁰ Hdt. 7.169.

¹²¹ On this story see also Crahay 1956: 324–5; Parke and Wormell 1956, vol. 1: 165–6; Fontenrose 1978: 128, 316.

¹²² See e.g. Macan 1895, vol. 2: 230; Parke and Wormell 1956, vol. 1: 92. See Parke and Wormell 1956, vol. 1: 165–79 for a sustained discussion of the evidence for Delphi’s role that remains strongly committed to questions of authenticity. On Delphi’s alleged medism see now also Scott 2014: 116–17.

¹²³ Hdt. 9.42. This oracle was delivered to the Persian general Mardonius. For Xerxes’ dreadful prophetic dreams see also Shimron 1989: 51–3.

Against this background the astonishing resolve of the Athenians – of Themistocles in particular – in the face of the Persian threat stands out. Herodotus devotes considerable space for the narrative to unfold. The story is laid out in a way that highlights the Athenian will to succeed and builds up to Themistocles' contribution.

This aspect comes early and forcefully in the way Herodotus introduces the story: 'At this point I find myself compelled to express an opinion which I know most people will object to; nevertheless, as I believe it to be true, I will not suppress it. If the Athenians, through fear of the approaching danger, had abandoned their country, or if they had stayed there and submitted to Xerxes, there would have been no attempt to resist the Persians by sea.'¹²⁴ What follows, then, is an extended oracle story featuring two prophecies which illustrates Herodotus' point.

A first tangible example of Athenian courage and resolve features in response to the first Delphic prophecy the Athenians receive, which hardly inspires confidence given its dark wording and the apparent threats it makes (ὧ μέλεοι, τί κάθησθε; 'Why sit you, doomed ones?', and, a little later: 'But all is ruined.').¹²⁵ Upon receiving this oracle, the Athenian delegates famously refuse to leave the temple, asking for a better prophecy – an unprecedented step in the Delphic tradition. Apparently the Athenians get away with it and are soon given a second oracle:

οὐ δύναται Παλλὰς Δί' Ὀλύμπιον ἐξιλάσασθαι,
 λισσομένη πολλοῖσι λόγοις καὶ μήτιδι πυκνῇ·
 σοὶ δὲ τόδ' αὖτις ἔπος ἐρέω, ἀδάμαντι πελάσσας.
 τῶν ἄλλων γὰρ ἀλίσκομένων ὅσα Κέρκροπος οὖρος
 ἐντὸς ἔχει κευθμῶν τε Κιθαιρῶνος ζαθέοιο,
 τεῖχος Τριτογενεῖ ξύλινον διδοῖ εὐρύσπα Ζεὺς
 μοῦνον ἀπόρρητον τελέθειν, τὸ σὲ τέκνα τ' ὀνήσει.
 μηδὲ σύ γ' ἵπποσύνην τε μένειν καὶ πεζὸν ἰόντα
 πολλὸν ἀπ' ἡπείρου στρατὸν ἦσυχος, ἀλλ' ὑποχωρεῖν
 νῶτον ἐπιστρέψας; ἔτι τοι ποτε κἀντίος ἔσσει.
 ὧ θεῇ Σαλαμίς, ἀπολεῖς δὲ σύ τέκνα γυναικῶν
 ἣ που σκιδναμένης Δημήτερος ἦ συνιούσης.

¹²⁴ Hdt. 7.139.

¹²⁵ Hdt. 7.140.

Fighting Wars and Telling Oracle Stories

Not wholly can Pallas win the heart of Olympian Zeus,
Though she prays him with many prayers and all her subtlety;
Yet will I speak to you this other word, as firm as adamant:
Though all else shall be taken within the bound of Cecrops
And the fastness of the holy mountain of Cithaeron,
Yet Zeus the far-sounding grants to Athene's prayer
That the wooden wall only shall not fall, but help you and your children.
But await not the host of horse and foot coming from Asia,
Nor be still, but turn your back and withdraw from the foe.
Truly a day will come when you will meet him face to face.
Divine Salamis, you will bring death to women's sons
When the corn is scattered, or the harvest gathered in.¹²⁶

As Herodotus goes on to tell us, the delegates found this oracle more acceptable. So they wrote it down and delivered it to Athens, where it was subsequently discussed in public. Several interpretations are put forward. In particular, the 'wooden wall' is identified as the oracle's central metaphor, with some suggesting that they refer to the Acropolis, others to ships. Themistocles' leadership takes shape against the background of other authoritative interpretations suggested by certain elders and professional oracle interpreters. He argues that the 'wooden wall' refers to ships and is ultimately able to convince his fellow Athenians that they should expand the fleet, thus preparing for the decisive naval battle at Salamis.¹²⁷

This story is remarkable in several respects.¹²⁸ This is the only example in the body of extant Greek literature of humans refusing to accept a prophecy delivered to them. That a second oracle is delivered also raises fundamental questions about the nature of oracular divination: are we dealing with one or two separate responses here? Is the second response pointing to the same future, just in more positive words? Or are the Athenians, through their stubborn resolve not to leave the temple, able to secure not just a better prophecy but also a better fate? The way in which Herodotus relates this story to us highlights such

¹²⁶ Hdt. 7.141.

¹²⁷ See Tuci 2006 for a detailed interpretation of this passage.

¹²⁸ The veracity of this story is discussed in Crahay 1956: 295–304; Parke and Wormell 1956, vol. 1: 169–71; Fontenrose 1976: 124–8, 316–17; Georges 1986; Bowden 2005: 100–7.

questions but leaves it up to the reader to find an answer. As in so many other oracle stories, language and the way in which it refers to reality again become an issue here.

In its strong focus on the human factor, the story counter-balances the later one about the defence of Delphi discussed above: while this story plays up the role of human courage and resolve as important factors in the Greek victory over the Persians, the narrative of Delphi's self-defence highlighted the contribution of the supernatural in the Greek victory.¹²⁹ Such apparent contradictions should not concern us: they are central to the fabric of the *Histories* as an account which is deeply committed to establishing some sort of balance between the opposing forces of Greeks and barbarians, East and West, rising and falling empires, human and divine.¹³⁰ The oracular voice as an authoritative voice remains deeply committed to the negotiation of opposing powers. As part of the larger religious dimension of the *Histories*, it both represents and directs the principle of a balanced cosmos – a central tenet of Herodotean 'theology'.¹³¹

Ultimately, then, Herodotus' use of the oracular voice supports his own voice as researcher and narrator of the *Histories*. In particular, the oracles concerning the Persian Wars have shown that Herodotus' telling of oracle stories also contributes to our understanding of the conflict he describes. It reveals an important aspect of the use of prophecies in ancient Greek storytelling in the aftermath of the Persian Wars in and beyond the *Histories*: as much as on the battlefield, the Persian Wars and their representation in Greek thinking about the past were fought in the form of conflicting oracle stories, promising success or failure on both sides of the conflict and helping to justify the decisions taken by individual Greek states.

¹²⁹ See also Hdt. 1.174 for another oracle downplaying (or indeed denying) human agency.

¹³⁰ On these themes and the structure of the *Histories* see Immerwahr 1966, in particular 148–88, 189–237, 307.

¹³¹ See e.g. Herodotus' statements about divinity and the balance of the cosmos at 1.4, 3.108, 7.10, etc. For oracle stories establishing a balance between opposing players in the Greek world see also Hdt. 5.67, 5.79, 5.89, 6.19 (6.76–7), 6.138–9 with Harrison 2000: 223–42.

Conclusion

This chapter has investigated the way in which Herodotus tells Delphic oracle stories in his account of the Greco-Persian Wars and their prehistory. Starting from the Croesus *logos*, I argued that his account of the rise and fall of King Croesus of Lydia serves as a paradigmatic tale for the principles and practices of human–divine communication in the *Histories*. I showed that here and elsewhere, Herodotus uses oracle stories in a number of ways. Bracketing events in the interval between prediction and fulfilment, oracles convey a sense of time and chronology. As an authoritative voice that supplements the voice of the historian, the oracle also allows Herodotus to evaluate events, people and institutions in contexts which require an authority greater than that of the historian.

In the *Histories*, the oracle thus features as a powerful voice, speaking both to the historical characters in the story and to the reader of the *Histories*. Herodotus recounts Delphic oracle stories frequently and emphatically, because it allows him to reflect on the motivations, desires and shortcomings of his historical characters. Oracles help Herodotus to retain a divine element in human history, even though in most instances this does not go beyond the oracle predicting what the gods know will happen. Human history then unfolds in the time before (and when) the divine prediction becomes fulfilled. If there is a more distinct sense of divine intervention, as in the story of the Persian defeat at Delphi, Herodotus is careful to separate his own analytical voice and the voice of the oracle from such miraculous accounts of divine presence. The storytelling mode thus ultimately also allows Herodotus to preserve the voice of the oracle as an authoritative voice that, as we have seen variously complements the authoritative voice of the historian.

Overall, then, Herodotus' *Histories* offer an early and powerful example of how productive it is to search for the meaning of oracles beyond the question of their authenticity. Herodotus has many of his key historical events unfold in the space between prediction and fulfilment. The detail

he provides about who consulted an oracle, why and to what effects is indeed revealing. It illustrates that the real ‘medium’ of the oracular is not the vapours, or even the Pythia (see the [previous chapter](#)), but narrative. It is through narrative and storytelling that oracles – not just some, but all oracles in the *Histories* – divulge their meaning and thus point towards a more complex reading of the past, which is missed when scholars focus only on their historicity.

CHAPTER 3

EURIPIDES

Ironic Readings of Apollo and his Prophecies

Introduction

In the [previous chapter](#) I considered how Herodotus told Delphic oracle stories in the *Histories*, in particular his use of narrative and storytelling featuring predictions from Delphi in light of his efforts to set himself up as a researcher, narrator and writer in a new genre. A number of key themes pertaining to oracle stories have emerged from this chapter: the need to ask the right question; the significance of the ‘enigmatic mode’ of oracles for the expression of the ontological difference between human and divine spheres; the potential for human misinterpretation; and the scope and limits of human efforts to ‘make sense’ of the prediction.

This chapter considers how an author writing around the same time as Herodotus makes use of oracle stories in a different genre and for an altogether different purpose.¹ I explore how the Athenian dramatist Euripides tells an extended oracle story in his tragedy *Ion* – a drama set at Delphi and revolving around the consultation of the oracle by one of its central characters. The drama tells the story of Ion, the son of Creusa and Apollo, who was abandoned as a baby and raised by the Pythia at Delphi. His existence as a temple servant at Delphi ignorant of his real identity is jeopardised when his birth mother,

¹ Herodotus’ *Histories* pre-date Euripides’ *Ion* by a couple of years. They were published sometime between 426 and 415 BCE. On the contested question of the dating of Herodotus’ *Histories* see e.g. Pelling 2000: 154–5 (with further literature). Euripides’ *Ion* was staged in Athens probably sometime between 413 and 411 BCE. On the question of the drama’s date see e.g. Conacher 1959: 26–9; Walsh 1978: 313–15; Zacharia 2003: 3–7.

Creusa, the queen of Athens, and her Thessalian husband, Xuthus, visit the oracle to enquire about having offspring.

Classical scholars have variously investigated the way in which prophecies act as literary devices in this and other extant samples of Greek tragedy, foreshadowing events and introducing references to the supernatural.² *Ion* in particular has been recognised as a drama which features Delphic themes and relies on prophecies to move the plot along.³ One dimension that has so far not received the attention it deserves is the way in which Euripides' drama does not just enact key themes of oracular divination but specifically follows and occasionally inverts the patterns of Delphic oracle stories. Euripides' depiction of the gods in *Ion*, I argue, emerges against the larger backdrop of the patterns of Delphic oracle stories as described in this book.

The overall aim of this chapter is thus twofold: first, to consider how the key features of oracle stories as described in the [previous chapter](#) 'translate' into the specific form of drama. Second, to investigate how Euripides makes use of oracle stories within the plot of this particular tragedy.

Two major strands of argument emerge from this investigation: first, I show that Euripides challenges the very essence of oracular divination as propagated by Herodotus and others. His way of telling the oracle story questions the Greek view of the gods as providing an alternative vantage point to determine the place of humanity in the world. Through the inversion of the norms and conventions of oracle stories, Euripides unmasks the underlying principles that guide human knowledge, interpretation and the establishment of meaning.

Second, I illustrate how Euripides applies this deconstruction of human ways of 'making sense' to a specific political and ideological context: Athenian political identity and the ideological narratives that support it. I argue that the drama draws on the semantics of oracle stories to challenge Athenian

² E.g. Kamerbeek 1965; Roberts 1984; Bushnell 1988. On oracles in Greek tragedy see also Johnston 2009; Kavoulaki 2009.

³ See e.g. Burnett 1962; Hamilton 1978; Lloyd 1986; Neitzel 1988; Hartigan 1991; Zacharia 2003: 128–38.

notions of citizenship and the Athenian myth of origin. *Ion* thus ultimately allows for an ironic reading of the divine and its impact on humanity, depicting religion – oracles in particular – as driven by the same ideological contradictions as human society and its casting of identity as difference.⁴

Gods and Humans: Incommensurable Orders of Being

The distinction between the human and the divine spheres as competing forces is the fundamental duality on which *Ion* is based. The central human characters, Ion, Creusa and Xuthus, act side by side with Hermes, Athena and (indirectly) Apollo. More importantly, however, the theme of human–divine communication is central to the very setup of the tragedy: *Ion* is situated in Delphi and staged around the consultation of Apollo's oracle by the royal family of Athens.⁵ With Xuthus and Creusa visiting the Delphic oracle, the human and divine dimensions are represented as opposing and potentially supplementary spheres.⁶

From the *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* we know that oracles are seen as having the capacity to both confuse and enlighten those who seek divine advice.⁷ This is also the general picture that emerges from numerous oracle stories, including those discussed in the [previous chapter](#). Ultimately, however, these stories stress that oracles are always truthful – the major challenge for humanity is to understand their meaning.⁸

Euripides in *Ion* addresses and inverts such expectations of oracles and the divine. In *Ion* human ignorance is not seamlessly supplemented by divine omniscience. As the tragic plot develops, the human and divine spheres do not seem to fit together to form a coherent universe. Communication between

⁴ Religion and Greek tragedy: Mikalson 1991; Osborne 1997; Sourvinou-Inwood 1997.

⁵ Delphi and Athens in the drama: Zacharia 2003: 7–43.

⁶ See also Burnett 1962.

⁷ *H. Merc.* 541–9.

⁸ On the meaning of enigmatic oracles see also Kindt [forthcoming](#).

the two orders of being results in a complex entanglement of human and divine meanings.⁹

This entanglement appears first in the scene in which the oracular response delivered to Xuthus is interpreted. Euripides has taken great care in outlining the encounter of Xuthus and Ion upon leaving the oracular shrine. Their exchange about the meaning of Apollo's prophecy remains one of the most elaborate discussions of an oracle's meaning we know of, although similar scenes by other authors exist.¹⁰

The confrontation between Xuthus and Ion is set out in different stages. Upon leaving the temple, Xuthus meets Ion and seeks to kiss and embrace him as his newly found son.

{Zo.} ὦ τέκνον, χαῖρ'· ἡ γὰρ ἀρχὴ τοῦ λόγου πρέπουσά μοι.

{Ion} χαίρομεν· σὺ δ' εὖ φρόνει γε, καὶ δὴ δὲντ' εὖ πράξομεν.

{Zo.} δὸς χερὸς φίλημά μοι σῆς σώματός τ' ἀμφιπτυχάς.

{Ion} εὖ φρονεῖς μὲν; ἢ σ' ἔμνηνε θεοῦ τις, ὦ ξένη, βλάβη;

XUTHUS: My son, I wish you joy! That is the proper way for me to begin my speech.

ION: Joy I have. But you, show modest good sense, and the two of us will both fare well.

XUTHUS: Allow me to kiss your hand and to embrace you!

ION: Are you quite sane? Or has some god-sent derangement afflicted you, stranger!¹¹

Ion's reaction to Xuthus' advance is a strong rejection of what he perceives to be an indecent physical assault.¹² What Xuthus intended to be a cordial embrace between father and son is taken by Ion as an unwelcome pass from a stranger. Xuthus subsequently tries to resolve the ambiguity in the situation with a clear statement of his intentions. He does so by disclosing to

⁹ On the representation of Apollo and his oracle in *Ion* see also Erbse 1975; Gauger 1977; Gellie 1984; Neitzel 1988; Zacharia 2003: 103–49. See also Lloyd 1986 on how human–divine interaction features in this drama.

¹⁰ E. *Ion* 517ff. Hdt. 7.143 and Hdt. 9.33.6–13 are just two examples in which the interpretation of a Delphic oracle features prominently.

¹¹ E. *Ion* 517–20. All translations of *Ion* are by Kovacs 1999. I have made alterations where necessary.

¹² The homoerotic undertone of this scene was first noted by Wilamowitz-Moellendorf 1926: 111 ('erotic attack' – 'erotischer Überfall'). As in this scene, the play generally uses a strong rhetoric of purity and pollution. On this point see Whitman 1974: 74–6; Zacharia 2003: 13, 129.

Ion what he regards as the most significant piece of information: ‘I am your father and you are my son’ (πατήρ σός εἰμι καὶ σὺ παῖς ἐμός).¹³ Ion, however, rejects Xuthus by questioning the authority behind his assertion: τίς λέγει τὰδ; ‘Who says so?’¹⁴

When Xuthus reveals the oracular authority behind his claim, he puts Ion at the centre of a difficult situation. Apollo himself, through his oracle, seems to confirm a claim that threatens Ion’s existence at Delphi, the place where he has grown up and from which he draws his whole social identity. Ion is referred to within the play as ὁ μαντευτὸς γόνος – ‘the son named by the seer’ (1209), ὁ πυθόχρηστος Λοξίου νεανίας – ‘the young man named by Loxias’ oracle’ (1218), τὸν τοῦ θεοῦ – ‘the god’s boy’ (1286), τοῦ θεοῦ καλοῦμαι δοῦλος – ‘the god’s slave’ (309) or simply Λοξίου – ‘Apollo’s’ (311). Since childhood he has spent his time in the oracular precinct, guarding the spatial and conceptual boundaries of the sanctuary.¹⁵ Thus, the only remaining way for Ion to ward off the threat to his existence at Delphi, the source of his identity, is to argue that Xuthus may have misunderstood the oracle: ἐσφάλης αἰνιγμ’ ἀκούσας, ‘You misinterpreted the riddle when you heard it.’¹⁶

Xuthus fails to acknowledge the point of Ion’s critique by taking it as a matter of hearing rather than the right interpretation (οὐκ ἄρ’ ὄρθ’ ἀκούομεν).¹⁷ But Ion is determined to demonstrate the correctness of his assumption by demanding to hear the exact wording of the prophecy from Xuthus.

{Ιων} ὁ δὲ λόγος τίς ἐστι Φοίβου;
 {Ξο.} τὸν συναντήσαντά μοι
 {Ιων} τίνα συνάντησιν;
 {Ξο.} δόμων τῶνδ’ ἐξιώντι τοῦ θεοῦ
 {Ιων} συμφορᾶς τίνος κυρῆσαι;
 {Ξο.} παῖδ’ ἐμὸν πεφυκέναι.
 {Ιων} σὸν γεγῶτ’ ἢ δῶρον ἄλλων;
 {Ξο.} δῶρον, ὅντα δ’ ἐξ ἐμοῦ.

¹³ E. *Ion* 530.

¹⁴ E. *Ion* 531.

¹⁵ See E. *Ion* 82–183.

¹⁶ E. *Ion* 533.

¹⁷ E. *Ion* 533. *Akouein* can mean both ‘to hear’ as a simple reception of sound and ‘to hear and understand’ (the reception of its content, its meaning).

Euripides: Ironic Readings of Apollo's Prophecies

ION: But what did Phoebus say?

XUTHUS: That the one who met me ...

ION: What meeting is this?

XUTHUS: ... as I came out of the temple of the god ...

ION: What would happen to him?

XUTHUS: ... is my son.

ION: Your own son, or merely a gift to you?

XUTHUS: A gift, but my true son.¹⁸

The ambiguity of the situation arises from the use of *phuein* in line 536. In the form in which it features here (a perfect infinitive in indirect speech) it can denote both 'has become' in the sense of 'is' – as it is commonly translated in this passage – as well as 'was born'.¹⁹ Usually both would amount to the same thing, but Ion, recognising both meanings, finds room for ambiguity in the first sense and suggests at 538 that he may simply 'be'/'have become' Xuthus' son without any claim to a biological relationship between them. Xuthus, in contrast, clearly thinks that Apollo's words imply exactly such a relationship.²⁰

Xuthus' reading of Apollo's words as implying a biological relationship is certainly the more natural one. It also resonates with other uses of *phuein* and its derivatives elsewhere in the drama, which abounds in the language of generation and offspring not only in the context of the specific question of Ion's parentage, but also with regard to the Athenian myth of autochthony (see below).²¹ Throughout *Ion*, *phuein* thus features frequently and it does so almost exclusively in the sense of biological generation.²² Indeed, Ion himself uses the verb in this sense just a

¹⁸ E. *Ion* 534–7.

¹⁹ The active meaning of 'gives birth' can be excluded as it does not exist in the perfect tense as is the case here.

²⁰ Another possible avenue of ambiguity in the oracle arises if *pais* in 536 could mean 'slave' and not just 'son'. Slavery is heavily thematised in *Ion* and Ion explicitly refers to himself as a slave (see e.g. 131–3, 309) and his life at Delphi as slavery (e.g. 556). The main obstacle to this interpretation is that, although common in comedy, there is only one attestation of *pais* meaning 'slave' in Greek tragedy: A. *Ch.* 653 (see Golden 1985: 96–7). Even if we follow Ellendt's *Lexicon Sophocleum* (s.v. παῖς) in considering S. *Ant.* 1012 a second instance, the odds that we have a third here seem slim. I thank Brennan Nicholson for both suggesting and subsequently critiquing this interpretation.

²¹ See Hajistephanou 1975: 125–6.

²² *Phuein* as 'to be born': E. *Ion* 3, 50, 70, 259, 261, 292, 313, 540, 778, 780, 1534, 1568, 1601. Note the genitives (with or without ἐκ) specifying parentage in many of these examples. *Phuein* as 'to give birth': 547, 560, 820, 1262. *Phuein* as 'to be so by

few lines further in the same exchange when he asks Xuthus: ἔα. τίνος δέ σοι πέφυκα μητρός; ‘But from what mother was I born to you?’ And, again, in line 542: γῆς ἄρ’ ἐκπέφυκα μητρός, ‘So was I born from the earth as my mother’?²³ Against this use of *phuein* in the same passage and elsewhere in the drama, Ion’s alternative reading of the oracle in 534–7 appears somewhat laboured and artificial – reflecting perhaps the artificial nature of Apollo’s larger plans to impose his own son on Xuthus.

Whatever the case, the ambiguity of Apollo’s oracle – and, in particular of its central verb, introduces a fundamental duality into the plot: the duality between the apparent and contrived meaning of the oracular response. Through his precise technique of investigating its wording, Ion eventually arrives at a full understanding of the potential semantic spectrum of Apollo’s oracle.²⁴ Both the apparent and the contrived reading of the prophecy are pointed out in his sharp question: σὸν γεγῶτ’ ἢ δῶρον ἄλλων; ‘Your own son, or merely a gift to you?’²⁵ However, just as Xuthus has failed to see the difference between hearing as a *formal act of perceiving sound* and hearing in the sense of *understanding information*, he does not now differentiate between the two potential meanings of the oracle: δῶρον, ὄντα δ’ ἐξ ἐμοῦ. ‘A gift, but my true son.’²⁶ Like so many other human protagonists in oracle stories who misinterpret Apollo’s obscure responses, Xuthus hears and sees only what he wants to hear and see. He is not able to appreciate the possible alternative meaning of the prophecy and the other reality to which it refers. Xuthus, the foreigner, the transgressor of boundaries

nature’ or ‘to be born so’: 240, 291, 400, 441, 1272, 1477, 1622 (most of which occur with an adjective describing character or background). There is only one passage in *Ion* in which *phuein* can be understood as a simple copulative ‘to be’ or ‘to become’ without (necessarily) the suggestion of actual birth or ‘by nature’, namely 1264.

²³ E. *Ion* 542.

²⁴ It is part of the elusive character of Apollo within the play (see below) that the prophecy is not given in direct speech but is related to us only mediated, namely through the play’s characters. It therefore does not make sense to reconstruct its ‘original’ wording as some scholars have attempted to do. See for example Owen 1939: xx; Neitzel 1988; Hartigan 1991: 76. What is important is that the characters within the play regard Xuthus’ report of the oracle as being accurate. For a discussion of the relevant passages of *Ion* concerning Apollo’s oracle see Gauger 1977: 78–89.

²⁵ E. *Ion* 537.

²⁶ E. *Ion* 537.

(on which more below), is unable to perceive the semantic boundaries between apparent and contrived readings of the prophecy. In contrast, Ion, the youth obsessed with purity and the maintaining of actual and conceptual boundaries, has worked out the two different readings of the prophecy.²⁷

What makes Euripides' account stand out is not merely that the characters offer different and conflicting interpretations, but that Xuthus manages to convince Ion of the correctness of his (misguided) reading of the oracular utterance. This is even more remarkable because Ion, through his skilful interrogation of Xuthus, is able to work out both possible meanings of the oracular response and even points out to Xuthus the possibility of misinterpretation. This is the only example extant in classical literature of an oracle story in which the correct interpretation of an ambiguous response is given by a character in the first instance but does not immediately gain the upper hand in the contest of different and conflicting interpretations, gaining general acceptance only much later.²⁸

Why does Euripides choose to tell the story in this way? Why does he put so much emphasis on the interpretation scene by distorting and even inverting the pattern that Delphic oracle stories normally follow? The specific duality between the apparent and the contrived readings of Apollo's oracle is organised along the axis of the greater duality between the human and divine spheres within the drama. Apollo's ambiguous oracle represents not just the difference in perspective and knowledge between the gods and mortals (as is frequently the case in Delphic oracle stories);²⁹ it also reveals more specific differences in interpretation, signification and the establishment of meaning between the human and divine spheres.³⁰ The

²⁷ On Ion's purity see Zacharia 2003: 12–13.

²⁸ The categories of what is right and wrong with regard to the interpretation of Apollo's oracle are themselves problematic (see below). On the larger theme of double meaning in Euripides' plays more generally see McDermott 1991.

²⁹ On oracular obscurity as a representation of the difference between the human and divine see Vernant 1991, 303–17; Manetti 1993: 14–19; and, in detail, the conclusion to this volume.

³⁰ Forehand 1979: 185 reads the drama as being concerned about epistemology and cognition, teaching us in particular about the 'nature of absolute truth vs. the reality

characters always assume that there is a solution to the oracle's ambiguity, never considering ambiguity itself part of the oracle's meaning. In the human sphere ambiguity is nothing more than a semantic possibility, immediately resolved when the words in question refer to something specific. This discrepancy between Apollo's language and its human interpretation thus again calls our attention to the general differences between human and divine perspective, human and divine language, human and divine narrative.

Concealing and Revealing

After delivering his prologue, Hermes disappears into the laurel bushes to watch the human tragedy unfolding on the stage.³¹ This emphasis on observation and the gaze draws attention to the staged nature of the dramatic universe and prepares the audience for its own role in assessing the tragic plot.³² The observing gaze of Hermes also finds its extension in the characters' constant reference to, and reflection on, how their actions might be perceived by others. Throughout the drama, the judging gaze of others is internalised and also anticipated by the play's characters.³³ As we shall see, the drama propagates a view in which notions of truth are negotiated and renegotiated in the public sphere.³⁴

The characters' perception of shame and revelation plays a central role, here seen in a statement by Creusa: ὦ ψυχά, πῶς σιγάσω; πῶς δὲ σκοτίας ἀναφῆνω εὐνάς, αἰδοῦς δ' ἀπολειφθῶ; 'My soul, how shall I keep silent? But how shall I reveal the secret union and lose my sense of shame?'³⁵ To avoid feelings of shame resulting from the disapproving gaze of others, Ion,

that we believe in'. Whitman 1974: 78 argues that in *Ion* 'the emphasis falls less on the problems of cognition itself and whether or not it is possible, and more on the pursuit of factual knowledge and, above all, the ability to accept and understand it'.

³¹ E. *Ion* 76–7. On Hermes' prophetic role in the prologue see also Hamilton 1978.

³² See Zacharia 2003: 16, n. 53 on the frequency of vision-related words in the drama.

³³ Shame and secrecy are a constant theme throughout Euripides' oeuvre; see for example Phaedra's secret love for Hippolytus in E. *Hipp.* 309ff.

³⁴ On the establishment of truth in the drama see Forehand 1979; Zacharia 2003: 176–82.

³⁵ E. *Ion* 859–61.

Creusa and the other characters within the drama constantly conceal potentially incriminating details of their life. Creusa tells nobody about her secret union with Apollo and exposes baby Ion in the cave where she was raped. Likewise, she later seeks knowledge concerning the fate of the boy in 'a secret oracle' (μάντευμα κρυπτόν).³⁶ The drama's elaborate semantics of secrecy and concealment and its opposite, revelation and exposure to the gaze, is frequently paired with dark and bright respectively as additional semantic markers to bring out its inherent moral dimension.³⁷

According to this logic, what is concealed and hidden from the eyes of others must necessarily be obscure, muddy and somehow shameful. It is in this sense that the drama's characters believe the ambiguous oracle to conceal a truth too shameful to reveal openly, for example when the chorus voices suspicion: 'O prophetic son of Leto, what song was this you uttered in prophecy? This boy nursed about your altars, from whence did he come? From what woman? This oracle is not to my liking: perchance it may involve deceit.'³⁸ And, a little later: 'Strange is the word of the god and strange the things it reports to me (ἄτοπος ἄτοπα γὰρ παραδίδωσί μοι τάδε θεοῦ φήμα). There is some clever trickery (δόλον τέχνην θ') in this boy raised here and begotten elsewhere.'³⁹ The 'out-of-place' (ἄτοπος) language of the oracle arouses the suspicion of the chorus and is believed to transmit things 'out of place' (ἄτοπα).⁴⁰ The ambiguous language of the oracle reinforces the notion of Ion's ambiguous and potentially deceitful identity.

But can the semantics of concealment and revelation apply also to the divine sphere? The characters certainly, seem to think so, for they speculate constantly, about the nature of

³⁶ E. *Ion* 334.

³⁷ See for example E. *Ion* 562, 911, 955, 1134, 1549–50. For the drama's semantics of secrecy, concealment, shame and the gaze more generally see also E. *Ion* 242–6, 272, 336–41, 429–32, 582–4, 666–7, 744, 758, 816–31, 865–75, 934, 944, 967, 983, 1029–36, 1069–73, 1369–72.

³⁸ E. *Ion* 681–5.

³⁹ E. *Ion* 690–3.

⁴⁰ E. *Ion* 690–1.

Apollo's character and his future plans for the human beings at his mercy. When Creusa suggests consulting the oracle about the fate of the little boy Apollo fathered, Ion wonders: πῶς ὁ θεὸς ὃ λαθεῖν βούλεται μαντεύσεται; 'Will the god prophesy a thing he wants concealed?'⁴¹ And upon Creusa's insistence that this must surely be the case, Ion answers:

{Ιων} αἰσχύνεται τὸ πρᾶγμα· μὴ ἔλεγχέ νιν.
{Κρ.} ἄλγυνεται δέ γ' ἡ παθοῦσα τῇ τύχῃ.

ION: Shame is what he feels at this matter! Do not show him up.

CREUSA: But pain is what she feels, she who suffered the blow.⁴²

Again feelings of shame have become thematised by a character in the drama. Yet this time it is not Creusa but Apollo to whom this emotion is attributed. This direct juxtaposition of the feelings of Apollo and Creusa (through the parallelism of *aischunetai* and *algunetai* at the beginning of their respective lines) ultimately flags a question that is fundamental to the interpretation of the drama: is what is perceived to be shameful for Creusa, a human being, also shameful for a god?⁴³

A first, sympathetic reading of the gods in *Ion* could start at the – frequently noted – absence of Apollo from the drama in which he plays such a central role.⁴⁴ For despite all the criticism directed against him, Apollo never appears on stage as a character in his own right to defend himself. In the drama's moral universe, however, shame results from exposure to the human gaze. By avoiding the gaze of the drama's characters, it could be concluded, Apollo avoids confronting the moral dimension of his dealings.⁴⁵ Secrecy and revelation as a framework for moral assessment of self and other belong to the human sphere, not the divine. They can be part of human speculation

⁴¹ E. *Ion* 365. See also E. *Ion* 357.

⁴² E. *Ion* 367–8.

⁴³ On this point see Zacharia 2003: 121. Classical scholarship is not united on the question of whether Apollo's rape of Creusa is a challenge to his moral integrity. See for example Burnett 1962: 90–1; Gellie 1984. A good summary of the different scholarly positions on this issue can be found in Zacharia 2003: 105–6.

⁴⁴ See for example Zacharia 2003: 103.

⁴⁵ Compare Athena's explanation of why Apollo sent her to speak to Ion and Creusa rather than appearing on stage himself in E. *Ion* 1555–9.

about the nature of the gods but are not themselves part of a contingent divine moral universe: such a thing, as Katherina Zacharia has argued, does not exist.⁴⁶ The divine sphere seems to have other semantics of concealment and revelation, free of morality and shame.

This sympathetic reading of Apollo then moves beyond questions of shame to focus on his intentions as communicated through Hermes. Rather than emphasising further existing discrepancies in the human sphere, Apollo, through his ambiguous oracle, sought to reconcile them. In this reading, the divine sphere, and Apollo in particular, has a mode of communication which conceptualises duality not as an antagonism of opposing forces but as the existence of two supplementary principles. In the divine sphere, duality is complementary rather than exclusive. The gods neither conceal, nor reveal. As Heraclitus has expressed it in his famous dictum, they indicate through signs (*sēmainein*) – a form of communication which transcends or combines the duality between revealing and concealing.⁴⁷ Apollo thus speaks in obscure language in order to describe the complexity and frequently contradictory nature of social relationships within the human world.

This reading would be in line with Greek views according to which the gods held a special vantage point.⁴⁸ From there they could view the human world as a whole, including and encompassing all the dichotomies that structure it from within. Mortals, in contrast, have a much more limited perspective. They favour explicit and unambiguous language and sharp delineations to establish identities through difference. In the mortal world, there is no child without parents, no husband without a wife, no citizen without aliens.

A good example of the limited human perspective is Xuthus.⁴⁹ Like all human beings, he has a vantage point different from

⁴⁶ Zacharia 2003: 121 rightly points out that such accusations of Apollo's moral integrity 'are to some extent misconceived, insofar as they start from the stated or unstated premise that Apollo is a symbol of unimpeachable moral authority'.

⁴⁷ Fr. 93 D-K.

⁴⁸ See for example Plu. *Moralia* 384D–394C (*The E at Delphi*), as discussed in the appendix to this volume.

⁴⁹ On the figure of Xuthus see Zacharia 2003: 70–6.

that of the gods.⁵⁰ Xuthus, Ion and Creusa and her servants look at social relationships from within the society of which they are a part. They are active agents in the establishment of social identity through the creation of differences. Thus, Xuthus cannot possibly participate in Apollo's double reading of reality as communicated through his obscure language. This is already clear in the debate about the oracle's meaning. From the human standpoint, Apollo's oracle appears deceitful.⁵¹ Blinded by his strong desire for a legitimate heir, Xuthus can see only the apparent side of things that constitute his reality.⁵² The contrived meaning of the prophecy would threaten his identity as king of Athens by excluding him from the lineage of its royal family.

The second, unsympathetic reading of Apollo and his oracles would focus on those two aspects of Apollo that *are* constantly visible on the stage (and hence subjected to human judgement both within the drama and by the audience): the consequences of Apollo's deeds on the human characters (in particular Creusa) and Apollo's oracles as the only 'tangible' representation of this divinity on stage. The first focus is clearly negative: the audience is constantly reminded of Apollo's rape through the depth of Creusa's suffering.⁵³ If we look at Apollo's oracles, the drama raises even more disturbing questions concerning Apollo's morality, integrity and predictive capability.⁵⁴ Within the tragic plot, these questions are verbalised by none other than Ion himself, who asks, ὁ θεὸς ἀληθῆς ἢ μάτην μαντεύεται; 'Does the god prophesy truthfully or falsely?'⁵⁵ The course of the plot will reveal that Apollo's oracle (and that of Trophonius) comes true not in an absolute sense, but for different characters in different ways. But

⁵⁰ See in detail Kindt [forthcoming](#) and [chapter 7](#) of this book.

⁵¹ See E. *Ion* 685.

⁵² On blindness and insight in Greek tragedy more generally: Goldhill 1986: 199–221.

⁵³ On the figure of Creusa see Loraux 1990; Zacharia 2003: 76–102.

⁵⁴ For the debate whether *Ion* depicts a positive and/or negative image of Apollo see (among others) Conacher 1959: 30–5 (discussing earlier scholarship); Burnett 1962; Erbse 1975; Gauger 1977: 61–123; Gellie 1984; Lloyd 1986; Zacharia 2003: 103–49, in particular 145–9.

⁵⁵ E. *Ion* 1537.

does this really answer Ion's question concerning the truthfulness of Apollo's oracles, or, as it were, that of the audience?

In this second, ironic reading the audience would see through Apollo's plotting and flimsy excuses. His ambiguity would appear to be less a representation of the special vantage point of the gods and instead reflect Apollo's somewhat selfish goal to reinstate his son to his proper social position – without, however, risking direct confrontation with Creusa, his own past immoral behaviour and, ultimately, the audience.⁵⁶

In this reading, Apollo's ambiguous oracle, which gives everyone the answer they want to hear, would be a clever (but ultimately cheap) move – more typical perhaps of selfish politicians and other demagogues who all too readily make different, even contradictory, promises to further their own cause. The alleged persuasive double-talking of the sophists might also come to mind. A divinity that gives everybody the oracle they want to hear even though it might not represent the truth is of little comfort to those seeking divine guidance.⁵⁷ For what divine substance can there be in oracles the truth of which is in the eyes of the human beholder? Judgement in this matter, however, obviously depends on the evolution of the tragic plot and hence must be postponed until the end of the drama.

Meanwhile, the ambiguous oracle delivered by Apollo to Xuthus sparks Ion's quest for his identity and temporarily disturbs the continuous narrative of the origin myth of Athens.⁵⁸ Human cognition makes distinctions where Apollo, through the ambiguity of his language, may envisage unity. Instead of one powerful narrative describing the continuous succession in the Athenian earthborn royal family, we find a variety of conflicting and largely incompatible narratives of the individual characters.⁵⁹ Apollo's ambiguous response triggers a process of

⁵⁶ On the representation of time in the drama see also Lee 1996.

⁵⁷ See Jäkel 1977; Zacharia 2003: 176–82 on the way in which the drama represents truth and deception.

⁵⁸ Myth in *Ion*: Saxonhouse 1986; McDermott 1991; Segal 1999; Zacharia 2003: 44–102.

⁵⁹ Zacharia 2003: 166–82 places these narratives in the larger context of polyphony in and of the drama. More on this below.

conflicting interpretations by different characters, a process in the course of which Ion's identity itself becomes ambiguous.⁶⁰

So far we have considered how Euripides in *Ion* draws on (and inverts) the rules and conventions of oracle stories to reflect on human modes of interpretation and the establishment of meaning, including religion as a form of 'making sense' of the world. It is now time to broaden our focus again and investigate how Euripides uses the oracular discourse to invite us to think about meaning in a more specific sense, namely the 'meaning' of a people: their identity. As an Athenian drama, *Ion* draws heavily on Delphic themes and the semantics of oracle stories to explore Athenian notions of self and other. The deconstruction of ideological narratives supporting the exclusive aspects of Athenian identity emerges as a second interpretative strand within the drama, complementary to the first one, which revolved around the deconstruction of oracular narratives.

Reading Social Identities: Identities within the City and the City's Identity

By delaying the moment when the meaning of Apollo's prophecy is finally established, Euripides creates a tragic space in which the various dualities that structure Athenian social identity are presented and debated by the drama's characters. Thus Apollo's oracle has a paradoxical effect. Through his attempt to identify and legitimise Ion as the true successor of the royal house of Athens, Apollo triggers a process of communication among the drama's characters which reveals some of the crucial differences that establish Athenian social identities – differences in social class, men vs women, legitimate vs illegitimate birth and *astoi/politai* (citizens of Attica) vs *xenoi* (foreigners).

It is none other than Ion himself who first raises the matter of illegitimate birth. With a simple reference to the oracular authority behind his claim (ἀναφέρω δ' ἐς τὸν θεόν),⁶¹ Xuthus is

⁶⁰ On Ion's ambiguous identity see also Zacharia 2003: 124.

⁶¹ E. *Ion* 543. In 560 Xuthus even encourages Ion to embrace him 'in obedience to the god' (πιθόμενός γε τῷ θεῷ).

eventually able to silence Ion. The boy now accepts the apparent reading of the prophecy and his new identity as the son of Xuthus, but immediately raises the question of the identity of his mother. When Xuthus fails to give Ion a satisfactory answer, both Xuthus and Ion dig up an old story. The illegitimate affair Xuthus had with a Delphic girl before he married Creusa is used as a welcome explanation of the maternal side of Ion's identity: Ion seems to be relieved and rejoices: ἐκπεφεύγαμεν τὸ δοῦλον, 'I have escaped servile birth.'⁶² However, new worries arise only a little later, when Ion imagines what his existence in Athens will be like:

εἶναι φασὶ τὰς αὐτόχθονας / κλεινὰς Ἀθήνας οὐκ ἐπείσακτον γένος, / ἴν' ἐσπεσοῦμαι
 δύο νόσω κεκτημένος, / πατρός τ' ἐπακτοῦ καὶ τὸς ὦν νοθαγενής. / καὶ τοῦτ' ἔχων
 τοῦνειδος ἀσθενὴς μένων / <αὐτὸς τὸ> μηδὲν κοῦδένων κεκλήσομαι.

'They say that the famous Athenians, born from the soil, are no immigrant race. I would be suffering from two disabilities if I were cast there, both the foreignness of my father and my own bastardy.'⁶³ With this blot upon my name I would remain powerless and be called a nobody (myself) and the son of nobodies.'⁶⁴

Considering the consequences that his identity as the son of a foreigner and as a bastard child would have in Athens, Ion wonders whether he would be better off staying in Delphi.⁶⁵

The problem Ion raises here concerning his birth outside marriage is neither trivial nor just a matter of xenophobia: rather, it relates to the deeper foundations of Athenian identity as supported by the myth of autochthony.⁶⁶ This myth tells the story of the birth of Erichthonius. In some versions he is considered to be identical with the mythical king Erechtheus, in others he is his grandfather. Erichthonius was born not as the result of a natural act of procreation but directly from the

⁶² E. *Ion* 556. See Walsh 1978 on the characters' rhetoric of birth and identity. See also Zeitlin 1989 on the character's self-perception.

⁶³ For the problem of bastardy as presented in Greek tragedy see also e.g. E. *Hipp.* 1082–3 with Patterson 1990.

⁶⁴ E. *Ion* 589–94. See also E. *Ion* 668–75.

⁶⁵ The question of whether or not bastards were regarded as citizens in Athens during the fifth century BCE is contested (see Macdowell 1976; Rhodes 1978).

⁶⁶ On Athenian imagery in *Ion* see Immerwahr 1972. The link between tragedy and Athenian political identity transcends *Ion*: see Saxonhouse 2009.

Earth.⁶⁷ According to this myth, the goddess Athena once visited Hephaestus who sought to first seduce and then to rape the goddess. In the ensuing struggle between them, some of Hephaestus' semen dropped onto Athena's thigh. The goddess quickly wiped it off using a piece of wool and dropped it on the ground. In this way, Erichthonius was conceived by the Earth, who passed him on to Athena after his birth.

This myth is central to our understanding of Athenian notions of self and other. For the Athenians considered themselves to be 'Erechtheidai' – descendants of Erechtheus. The myth of autochthony thus provided the Athenians with a compelling narrative that suggested a direct link between place and identity. At the same time, the myth also explains the strong notion of exclusivity inherent in Athenian (political) identity.⁶⁸ As Ariene Saxonhouse succinctly puts it: 'The artificial boundaries and artificial connections of a political unit were made natural by original birth from the soil. But they also gave the city its exclusivity and its aristocracy, its rejection of what was other and of those not descended from the original earthborn race.'⁶⁹ The notion of autochthony defines Athens as a social and political community, drawing a clear boundary between the autochthonous Athenians on the one hand and everybody who is not autochthonous – and thus outside the community – on the other.

In *Ion*, however, this boundary runs right through the royal family of Athens: all the central characters of the drama are at once insiders and outsiders of the society to which they strive to belong. *Ion* does not endorse the Athenian myth of origin; it considerably complicates it by disrupting the continuous succession of the earthborn royal family of Athens. In the drama, the inclusive and exclusive dimensions of identity

⁶⁷ On this myth and its representation in *Ion* and elsewhere in Greek thought and literature see e.g. Rosivach 1977 and 1987; Loraux 2000; Blok 2009.

⁶⁸ On exceptions to the descent rule in Athens during the fifth and fourth centuries BCE see Davies 1977–8; Cohen 2000: 63–70. On myth in Athenian public and political discourse more generally see Loraux 2000. On the drama's theme of autochthony see also Saxonhouse 1986; Loraux 1990; Zacharia 2003: 56–65.

⁶⁹ See Saxonhouse 1986: 272. On race and Athenian identity: Lape 2010 (with further literature).

appear intertwined and incompatible because they mark as *external* to the community of Athens what should be and aims to be inside.⁷⁰

Of all the characters, this applies in the most fundamental sense to Xuthus, king of Athens and a foreigner at the same time, which poses specific problems for the Athenian community. Xuthus is a highly problematic figure. Thessalian by birth, he was admitted to the community of the earthborn and the royal family of Athens because of his achievements in warfare. Xuthus thus represents a different definition of participating in a community, other than by descent. In *Ion*, he is depicted as the crosser of (spatial and conceptual) boundaries. He is not only an intruder into the Athenian community of the earth-born but also the only character who is able to consult Apollo's oracle, although both Ion and Creusa plan to do so.⁷¹

But Xuthus is not just external to the group of the *autochthones*.⁷² More significantly, he threatens the identity of the community by not participating in the shared mythical narrative of the Athenian autochthonous community.⁷³ Because he is himself not born from the earth he sees no problem introducing Ion, whom he considers his son begotten outside marriage, into the royal family of Athens as legitimate heir to royal power. *De facto* this would mean the end of Athens as the community of the autochthonous. The prospect of Ion's entry into the Athenian royal family as the son of Xuthus, a foreigner, challenges and threatens the existence of the Athenian identity as defined through the myth of autochthony.

The consequences Ion's introduction to the royal family would have for Creusa are first reflected on from the point of view of the chorus. Fearing that if Xuthus' plan was

⁷⁰ For a reading of the drama which seeks to place it more explicitly in the historical context of Ionianism and Athenian imperialism see Zacharia 2003, in particular 48–55. On fifth-century ethnic identities in ancient Greece more generally see also Alty 1982 and, in particular, Hall 2002.

⁷¹ See E. *Ion* 334, 1546–8. On Xuthus as intruder to the community of the earth-born: Zacharia 2003: 75.

⁷² His status as an outsider is further emphasised within the drama by his emotional detachment from the suffering of the other characters.

⁷³ Assmann 1992: 39–40 correctly observed that to keep its integrative power, the narrative of a community's past needs to be shared by the members of that community.

implemented, their mistress would be excluded from the royal lineage of Athens, Creusa's maidservants again point to Ion's illegitimate birth and his foreignness.⁷⁴ It is an old servant who finally voices the possibility that the queen herself may be excluded from the community of the autochthonous. In conversation with Creusa he states:

δέσποινα, προδεδόμεσθα (σὺν γὰρ σοὶ νοσῶ) / τοῦ σοῦ πρὸς ἀνδρὸς καὶ
μεμηχανημένως / ὑβριζόμεσθα δωμάτων τ' Ἐρεχθέως / ἐκβαλλόμεσθα.

'Mistress, we have been betrayed by your husband! (I share in your grief.) He has done us a premeditated outrage, and we are being ejected from the house of Erechtheus!'⁷⁵

This is to say that if Ion were indeed transferred to Athens as Xuthus' son, the boy's future offspring – and with him the Athenians – would be descendants of a foreigner and another woman, *de facto* bringing the lineage of Erechtheus and Erichthonius to an end.

In addition to this reading of the situation, the old man offers his own reconstruction, his own oracle story about what happened:

'He [Xuthus] came as a foreigner to the city, married you, and received your house and your patrimony, but now it is clear he has reaped in secret a harvest of children by another woman. How he did so in secret I will tell you. ... He took some slave woman, lay with her in secret, and begot this boy. He took him out of the country and gave him to some Delphian to raise. ... When Xuthus learned that the young man was full grown, he persuaded you to come here to ask about your childlessness. So the god was no liar. The liar was Xuthus ...' (κἄθ' ὃ θεὸς οὐκ ἐψεύσαθ', ὅδε δ' ἐψεύσατο)⁷⁶

Misguided assumptions, storytelling and deceit, built on apparent readings of Apollo's oracle, and the limited perspective of the human condition result in a widening gap between the true state of things and the characters' perceptions. Throughout the drama there is a tension between reality and appearance as the

⁷⁴ E. *Ion* 681–5, 719–24. See also E. *Ion* 1069–73.

⁷⁵ E. *Ion* 808–11. For a reading of the drama that focuses on the men–women dichotomy see Dunn 1990. On gender in the oeuvre of Euripides see also Chong-Gossard 2008.

⁷⁶ E. *Ion* 813–25.

drama's characters become ever more entangled in storytelling and diverging narrative constructions of their own and each other's lives.⁷⁷ Much of the drama's situational irony springs from the widening gulf between what the characters say and what they know, between their perception of self and other and the audience's insight concerning the true nature of things. As Ion rightly observes in a somewhat idiomatic statement relevant to more than just the situation at hand: οὐ ταὐτὸν εἶδος φαίνεται τῶν πραγμάτων / πρόσωθεν ὄντων ἐγγύθεν θ' ὁρωμένων, 'things do not look the same close up as from a distance'.⁷⁸ The increasing conflict between reality and appearance eventually leads to the paradox in which Creusa plans to kill Ion, the latest offspring in the autochthonous royal line of Athens, in order to protect her own social and political position and that of her autochthonous house. Ion, the boy concerned with purity, has himself become a stain on the purity of Creusa's lineage. However, Creusa's intentions are discovered through a bird omen, and the Delphians vote to stone her for the attempted murder of Ion.⁷⁹

The two ways of reading Apollo's prophecy are like two different paths the characters can take. Although combined they eventually lead to a happy ending, the apparent reading alone raises the question: what if Ion was indeed the son of Xuthus? The ambiguous oracle, with its unstable boundary between apparent and contrived meaning, thus invites the characters – and with them the audience – to explore the boundaries of Athenian notions of identity as difference.⁸⁰ Three crucial divisions within Athenian society become clear: differences in

⁷⁷ On truth and reality in *Ion* see also Jäkel 1977; Forehand 1979.

⁷⁸ E. *Ion* 585–6.

⁷⁹ This is revealed through the account of a servant who was present at the incident. See E. *Ion* 1122–8. Interestingly, in his account, Ion's identity is still linked to Apollo's oracle. The Delphians see the attempt to poison him as an attack on Ion's purity and as a pollution of the sanctuary (see E. *Ion* 1222–5).

⁸⁰ Such connections between language and society are not specific to *Ion* but can also be found in other Greek tragedies, 'which depict and analyse the tensions, uncertainties and collapse of social order, return again and again to the shifting, distorting qualities of language – the ambiguities of the normative terms of society, the tensions in the civic and familial vocabulary and discourse, the twisting manipulations and over-rigid assertions of agonistic debate', Goldhill 1986: 2.

class, legitimacy of birth vs bastardy, and citizens vs aliens. The boundary between who is ‘in’ and who is ‘out’ is approached from both sides through different perspectives offered by the characters.

At the centre of the conflicts arising from the one-dimensional reading of Apollo’s enigmatic prophecy is Ion himself. In the beginning of the drama he derives his identity entirely from his relationship to Apollo. Xuthus, however, redefines his existence as roaming: ἅλλ’ ἐκλιπὼν θεοῦ δάπεδ’ ἀλητείαν τε σὴν, ‘leave the god’s precincts and your homeless life’.⁸¹ It is with such strong words that Xuthus expresses the fact that Ion’s Delphic identity has now fully dissolved. Towards the end of the drama, Ion seems to have accepted this interpretation when he refers to his life at Delphi as nameless (ἄνώνυμος).⁸² Meanwhile, in the various human interpretations of Apollo’s ambiguous oracle, Ion’s social existence loses its purity and becomes itself ambiguous. During his transition from Delphi to Athens he is depicted as an *astos* and a *xenos*, as the long-desired heir and the disliked usurper of royal power, as a bastard and a legitimate son.⁸³

Why does Euripides present Ion as a challenge to Athenian identity? John Davies has argued that although we tend to assume Athenian citizenship based on descent to be a fairly stable factor in the social and political history of Athens in the late fifth century BCE, citizenship was, in fact, a concept challenged at that time.⁸⁴ Davies states that ‘the subject did become, and remained, a matter of intense interest and pre-occupation: that the questions “Who is to be, and who is not to be, in the Athenian community, and why?” were continually being posed by pressures from within and without ...’.⁸⁵ But instead of offering a straight answer to these questions, *Ion* reflects on their social repercussions and depicts them in an elaborate semantics of inside and outside. In doing so,

⁸¹ E. *Ion* 576. At Delphi Ion was literally nameless; without a father he lacked a patronym.

⁸² E. *Ion* 1372.

⁸³ See Vogt 1998 on Delphi as a setting of Greek tragedy in Euripides’ *Ion* and Aeschylus’ *Eumenides*.

⁸⁴ Davies 1977–8.

⁸⁵ Davies 1977–8: 118.

the drama explores the inclusive and exclusive dimensions of Athenian political and social identity.

Citizenship based on descent had already been an issue earlier in the fifth century BCE, when Pericles introduced a new law concerning the group from which the *politai* should derive. At the time of Cleisthenes, a father had to be an Athenian citizen to pass on citizenship to his children.⁸⁶ After 451/0 BCE, however, the new citizenship legislation of Pericles required both parents to be Athenian citizens.⁸⁷ The law of Pericles soon lost its force (although it was revived later) and during the oligarchic regime of 411 BCE political rights were bestowed on 5000 men who could support the oligarchs with money or military service. Military support was also crucial to the mass extensions of political citizenship during the Peloponnesian War. During the turbulent times of the late fifth century BCE, diverging definitions of citizenship were thus discussed in Athens and elsewhere in Greece; and the actual realisations ranged from extreme exclusion (during the oligarchic regime) to far-reaching openness. By depicting the *de facto* social position of the drama's characters as largely incompatible with the Athenian myth of autochthony, the *Ion* points to the gap between ideological pretence and reality as lived, and thus illustrates conflicting discourses within contemporary Athenian society. At a time of war, when the ideologies of identity and Athenian supremacy were particularly stressed, Euripides challenged ideologically biased ways of thinking. Athenian claims to leadership of the Greeks (or at least the Ionians) during the Peloponnesian War, for example, were certainly part of the ideological background of the drama's audience.

Although the drama mirrors contemporary concerns about who should be 'in' and who should be 'out', the *Ion* moves

⁸⁶ On Athenian citizenship see (among others) Sealey 1983; Manville 1990. See also Davies 1977–8; Osborne 1978; Vatin 1984; Sinclair 1988, in particular 24–34; Lambert 1993: 25–57.

⁸⁷ On the Periclean citizenship law of 451/0 BCE see Patterson 1981; Walters 1983; Todd 1993: 177–8; Boegehold 1994. Cohen 2000: 63–70 has suggested a radical reinterpretation of the meaning of *astos* and thus of the law of Pericles. However, in a review of Cohen's book Robin Osborne (2002) has shown that *astos* was not opposed to *politēs* but was used instead of it in a legal context.

beyond that question by focusing more specifically on the divisions within Athenian society. This play supports the definition of Athenian citizenship as based on descent, but at the same time explores its exclusive aspects.⁸⁸

Ambiguity Resolved: A Divine Oracle Spoken in Human Language?

The scene in which Creusa and Ion finally recognise each other mirrors the scene of the first encounter of Xuthus and Ion at the beginning of the drama. There are striking parallels between both scenes in terms of their internal structure and significance for the development of the tragic plot. Where the former emphasises ambiguity and initiates Ion's quest for his identity, the latter brings clarity and revelation and sets off a process through which Ion can finally gain true self-knowledge. While the first scene takes place in front of Apollo's temple, the second scene, which eventually brings closure to the drama, unfolds right inside Apollo's holy shrine.⁸⁹ And, perhaps most significantly, in both scenes it is the interpretation of a divine sign (Apollo's oracle and the wicker cradle that the Pythia had kept at Apollo's request) that brackets Ion's enquiry into his identity. Both scenes correspond to important stages of Ion's assumption of his real identity. First, the contrived identity of Ion as Apollo's 'son', which Ion has assumed instead of his biological identity, is disputed by Xuthus, thus leaving Ion in a state of insecurity, namelessness, doubt and confusion (see above). This vacuum is filled when Ion learns that Creusa is his biological mother and Apollo his real father.

Why is true recognition possible in the second instance but not in the first? Why can the obscure wicker cradle help the characters understand who they are, whereas Apollo's equally obscure oracle cannot? By constructing the two scenes parallel

⁸⁸ On the debated issue of the drama's date see Conacher 1959: 26–9; Walsh 1978: 313–15; Zacharia 2003: 3–7.

⁸⁹ See Segal 1999 for a reading of *Ion* in terms of its depiction of generational passage. See Zeitlin 1989 for an interpretation of the drama as an enquiry into the identity of the self.

to one another, Euripides again draws our attention to differences between human and divine language, interpretation and the establishment of meaning.

The most expressive image of the drama is the antagonism between mother and son, which reaches its climax when Ion tries to kill Creusa, who has fled to Apollo's altar as a suppliant.⁹⁰ The conflict between Ion and Creusa is described as a total reversal of the ordinary from Ion's point of view: Creusa has intruded into his social space (the oracular precinct represented by the altar)⁹¹ and turned the normal order of things upside down. Creusa, who tried to murder the god's son, now sits at Apollo's altar and claims that she, and not Ion, is dedicated to the god. At the same time Ion himself, by making a move to kill a suppliant at the god's altar, now threatens to pollute the very temple he was busy purifying earlier.⁹²

In the end, it is none other than the Delphic priestess herself who 'as Apollo's agent'⁹³ sets out to resolve the crisis. Coming from Apollo's holy seat she speaks to Ion (and Creusa) straight from the centre of the earth and, in effect, the spatial and conceptual centre of the tragic plot itself. With Apollo's authority behind her, the priestess offers an alternative, more powerful *logos* and is thus able to prevent the escalation of the crisis.

Through the appearance of the priestess, Apollo takes over again to bring order to the chaos of human relationships. The priestess prepares the play's final reversal, which resolves the crisis by providing Ion with the wicker cradle she has kept since she found him as a baby on the steps of Apollo's temple.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ E. *Ion* 1250ff.

⁹¹ Wiles 1997: 188 states that 'although suppliants in normal historical practice might take refuge anywhere within the bounds of a shrine, in the schematic and simplified world of the play the suppliant must cling to the stage object that represents the altar or the statue of the god'.

⁹² See E. *Ion* 102–83.

⁹³ Rosivach 1977: 292.

⁹⁴ E. *Ion* 1337ff. Compare E. *Ion* 329 where Ion tells Creusa, who has asked him if he has never tried to find his parents, that he has no sign or token (*tekmerion*) with which to begin such an enquiry.

The reading of the wicker cradle is like the reading of a prophecy.⁹⁵ It is delivered by the priestess on behalf of Apollo.⁹⁶ Like an oracle, it does not reveal its meaning directly: its contents must be examined carefully in order to disclose its significance. However, the wicker cradle, despite being a sign provided by a god, requires *human* knowledge and language to become meaningful. As Rebecca Bushnell has put it: ‘if the cradle is a hidden or mysterious sign that the god has now revealed, the tokens within are also the *symbola* of the mother, and not of the god’.⁹⁷

This time the characters can reach a successful interpretation because it is human and not ambiguous divine language through which Apollo pursues his plan. The wicker cradle only *guides* the communication between Creusa and Ion to the desired end. Moreover, it is human, not divine knowledge through which the meaning of the cradle is revealed. Ion knows what tokens are hidden within the cradle and can therefore verify Creusa’s description of what is inside. He can authenticate the truthfulness of Creusa’s claim that she is indeed his mother. The wicker cradle does not itself communicate this knowledge. Whereas the (mis)reading of Apollo’s ambiguous oracle could not induce true recognition of self and other on the part of the characters, the reading of the wicker cradle initiates a process in the course of which Ion can successfully establish a stable identity. It is only at the end of the play that Ion learns about his divine descent. In the drama, *anagnōrīsis* – the mutual recognition of loved ones – is also self-recognition of the play’s central character.⁹⁸ The wicker cradle thus reveals Ion’s origin and tells a new, much stronger narrative of his identity than his Delphic existence could ever provide.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ See Bushnell 1988: 123.

⁹⁶ See E. *Ion* 1347–9. That the priestess claims that Apollo made her keep the wicker cradle poses interesting questions of Apollo’s capacity to foresee and direct the course of events depicted on the stage. Does this mean that Apollo foresaw that his plan would go wrong and that the wicker cradle would be needed to enable Ion and Creusa to recognise each other in his temple? Why else would he ask the priestess to keep it?

⁹⁷ Bushnell 1988: 123.

⁹⁸ Lee 1996: 103 states that ‘the recognition re-presents the moment of Ion’s birth and exposure’.

⁹⁹ See Mueller 2010 on the meaning of the symbols in the basket.

Tellingly, perhaps, this narrative also involves a clarification of Apollo's words from earlier on in the drama, recalling the ambiguous use of *phuein* in Xuthus' rendition of the oracle:

{Ιων} πῶς οὖν τὸν αὐτοῦ παῖδ' ἔδωκ' ἄλλῳ πατρὶ
 Ζούθου τέ φησι παῖδ' ἃ μ' ἔκπεφυκέναι;
 {Κρ.} πεφυκέναι μὲν οὐχί, δωρεῖται δέ σε
 αὐτοῦ γεγάτα·

ION: Why did he give his own son to another father?

Why say I am the son of Xuthus?

CREUSA: He did not say you are his son;

He merely gave you, his own son, as a present to him.¹⁰⁰

In placing the emphasis again on the meaning of *phuein*, the exchange between Creusa and Ion recalls the earlier one between Xuthus and Ion discussed in the first section of this chapter. Through Creusa's clarifying words, the meaning of the oracle is now evident.

Yet even with his matrilinear descent now firmly established, Ion still has doubts concerning the identity of his father.¹⁰¹ Perhaps Creusa just invented the story about the divine rape to conceal an even more shameful affair with a human being? The way in which Ion suggests that Creusa reveal his identity to him secretly (περικαλύψαι ... σκότον) is telling, as σκότος covers a broad range of meanings including *darkness*, *blindness*, *dizziness* and, significantly, *the darkness of the womb*.¹⁰² Again, the drama's semantics of darkness, concealment, shame and the gaze is used to render the frame of reference for the characters' perceptions of self and other: Ion, whose identity as the fruit of Creusa's womb has just come to light, suspects that the darkness of Creusa's womb hides a secret too shameful for mother and son to be revealed openly.

Before Ion can consult Apollo himself about his true fatherhood, the goddess Athena intervenes and confirms Creusa's

¹⁰⁰ E. *Ion* 1532–5.

¹⁰¹ E. *Ion* 1523–7.

¹⁰² See E. *Ion* 1522.

account.¹⁰³ In accordance with the drama's semantics of shame and the gaze, Ion's immediate reaction to Athena's appearance is to wonder whether he had better avert his eyes: 'Let's get away from here, mother, and not look on the gods – unless it's time for us to see.'¹⁰⁴ But Athena encourages both to stay. With her 'sun-like countenance' (ἀντήλιον πρόσωπον) announcing her presence at Apollo's oracle and signifying that it is indeed time to see, Athena brings total revelation.¹⁰⁵

μη̄ φεύγετ'· οὐ γὰρ πολεμίαν με φεύγετε / ἀλλ' ἐν τ' Ἀθήναις κἀνθάδ' οὔσαν εὐμενῇ.
/ ἐπώνυμος δὲ σῆς ἀφικόμην χθονὸς / Παλλὰς, δρόμῳι σπεύσας· Ἀπόλλωνος πάρα,
/ ὅς ἐς μὲν ὄψιν σφῶιν μολεῖν οὐκ ἤξiou, / μη̄ τῶν πάροιθε μέμψις ἐς μέσον μόληι,
/ ἡμᾶς δὲ πέμπει τοὺς λόγους ὑμῖν φράσαι· / ὥς ἦδε τίκει σ' ἐξ Ἀπόλλωνος πατρός,
/ [...] ἀλλ' ὥς περαίνω πρᾶγμα καὶ χρησμούς θεοῦ ...

'Do not run away! It is not an enemy you are fleeing but one who is your friend both here and in Athens. I, Pallas, who gave my name to your land, have come here, sent in haste by Apollo. He has not thought it best to come to see you both lest reproach for what happened before come out into the open. He has sent me to tell you that this woman is your mother and Apollo your father. ... But I must bring the business of the gods' oracles to a conclusion ...'¹⁰⁶

The epiphany of Athena combines both previous forms of divine revelations: a divine voice *and* a physical presence. She not only throws light on the specifics of the oracular plot set up by Apollo but also anticipates events beyond the action depicted on stage: Ion's four sons will become the founding fathers of cities in Asia and Europe and the Dorians and Achaeans will be named after the offspring of Xuthus and Creusa. The openness and clarity with which she addresses her human audience both on and off-stage, comparable only to the speech of Hermes in the prologue, is in strong contrast with the ambiguity of Apollo's oracle. The drama's final scene thus once again creates awareness of the differences between ambiguous

¹⁰³ The mythical narrative of Ion was well known in Greek thought and literature; not, of course, as a seamlessly unified story, but in different, frequently mutually exclusive versions and variations (see Cohen 2000: 79–90, Zacharia 2003: 60–5). That Apollo is the boy's true father, however, is not attested before Euripides' play (see Conacher 1959: 23–6; Gellie 1984: 94).

¹⁰⁴ E. *Ion* 1551–2.

¹⁰⁵ E. *Ion* 1550.

¹⁰⁶ E. *Ion* 1553–60, 1569.

speech and clear speech, and the source of the drama's tragic entanglements is now resolved.

Duality Reconciled?

Significantly, however, Ion's Delphic self is only partially replaced by his new Athenian identity: in the end, both are combined. It is not only Ion who now shares the identity of the earthborn. In accepting him into the continuous line of their autochthonous ancestors, the Athenians in turn participate in Ion's former identity: as Ion's descendants, all future Athenians will be 'sons' of Apollo.

Duality plays a central role within the semantics of the *Ion*. Starting with the duality between the human and the divine spheres, duality pervades all levels of the tragic plot. It is present in the two competing interpretations of Apollo's ambiguous oracle, and also permeates all scenes of the drama in a variety of antithetical pairs: inside vs outside, purity vs pollution, absence vs presence, truth vs lie, father and son, mother and son, to mention just a few.

Perhaps the most impressive image of duality and the human response to it can be found in the two drops of Gorgon blood with their dual deadly and healing powers.¹⁰⁷ Significantly, Creusa wants to make use just of the deadly one to kill Ion: she has no use for the other.¹⁰⁸ Both the human and the divine spheres know duality, but whereas the divine sphere conceptualises duality as the contingent and supplementary relationship between two opposing principles, duality in the human sphere is marked by the antagonism of seemingly incommensurable opposites.

At the end of the drama, however, duality is reconciled. Good and bad do mingle, despite Creusa's earlier contention that they would not.¹⁰⁹ Creusa, for example, is both life-giving and potentially life-threatening to Ion. Such integration of

¹⁰⁷ E. *Ion* 1003–15.

¹⁰⁸ E. *Ion* 1018.

¹⁰⁹ E. *Ion* 1017. See also Zacharia 2003: 165: 'Euripides' play ... does indeed mingle good with evil. In Euripides' plays there are always two drops of blood.'

opposites finds its extension on a more abstract level in the drama's reflection on Athenian identity. Although *astoi* and *xenoi*, men and women still exist as opposites, they are no longer mutually exclusive. In the end they can coexist peacefully in the *oikos* of Ion, Creusa and Xuthus. Zacharia has rightly argued that the drama encourages a more integrated perspective on duality – a perspective which does not simply drop one side of the equation for the benefit of the other but moves towards the acceptance of polyphony as the coexistence of independent voices.¹¹⁰

This applies not only to the human characters within the drama, but also to the human spectators attempting to make sense of the tragic plot depicted on the stage. The drama's modern audience finds itself in a position similar to its human characters. Like the drama's characters favouring the apparent side of Apollo's ambiguous oracle, the human spectators have (unsuccessfully) attempted to establish a consistent reading of the drama itself by dissolving its ambiguities. Is this a tragedy or a comedy? Is the plot driven by human or divine agency? Is this a play of human or divine narrative? Is this drama about Ion or Creusa? About Delphi or Athens? Classical scholarship holds the *Ion* to be an ambiguous play.¹¹¹ I believe these disagreements are not due to a framework too unsophisticated to allow for a coherent reading of the play; rather, I would like to posit, with Zacharia, that such divergent readings are inscribed in the drama's semantics of polyphony itself.¹¹² Put into the larger picture of how duality features within the *Ion*, the duality between the diverging interpretations of the drama is integrative and supplementary, not exclusive: the *Ion* is about Athens *and* Delphi, about Ion *and* Creusa, a tragedy *and* a comedy.

¹¹⁰ Zacharia 2003. On the female voice in *Ion* see Chong-Gossard 2008: 48–51.

¹¹¹ On *Ion* as tragedy or comedy see (among others) Conacher 1959: 35–9; Knox 1979; Gellie 1984; Matthiessen 1989–90; Zacharia 1995; Zacharia 2003: 150–5; Hunter 2011. I was unable to consult Kiso 1996. On Delphi and/or Athens as the drama's major focus see Zacharia 2003: 7–43 (discussing earlier scholarship). On human or divine agency and causation in the drama see Burnett 1962; Erbse 1975: 53; Lloyd 1986; Zacharia 2003: 139–45. On Creusa (rather than Ion) as the drama's central character see Whitman 1974: 82; Loraux 1990.

¹¹² See Zacharia 2003: 147–9. See also Gellie 1984.

Dual pairs do not exclude each other but can coexist as mutually reinforcing principles.

Before I conclude I would like to return to the question of the drama's depiction of the gods. As I have shown above, the drama allows for both a straightforward reading of the gods, most notably Apollo, as powerful agents and truthful reference points, and an ironic reading, in which the gods ultimately fail to provide truth and guidance. Here, too, I think we should accept these alternative perspectives as dialogical (or dialectical) complements.¹¹³ The persistent possibility of a straight and powerful reading of the gods on the one hand and of an ironic reading of divinity on the other adds another dimension to our interpretation of the drama as one which challenges authoritative discourses of identity.

The drama's tragic entanglements, I have shown, challenge the exclusive structures of ideologically motivated discourses of superiority and uniqueness, and show the absurdity of conclusions following from them. This applies to Athenian narratives of identity as well as to religion as an authoritative source for such discourses. Not only does the drama afford an ironic reading of Apollo and his oracles: even in the end, after Athena's intervention and the final words of the 'new' Ion, a feeling of unease lingers. The audience might think of the high cost at which this harmony is achieved: Creusa and Ion reconcile only by keeping Xuthus in the belief that he is the real father. The way in which Athena's *ex machina* appearance brings the still-existing frictions and controversies among the characters to a halt and makes the ending fit the traditional story raises further questions. Her appearance is so abrupt and artificial that it becomes quite clear that this ending is a happy fantasy. The real world, unfortunately, does not work like this.

I believe that Euripides deliberately leaves open the question whether the gods can be trusted or not. The drama allows for a reading in which the gods both give and fail to give final closure. In the *Ion*, religion appears to be both a powerful source

¹¹³ See Zacharia 2003: 176–82.

Conclusion

of orientation *and* just another human construction with very little divine about it.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored a dramatic rendering of a Delphic oracle story. More specifically, it has considered how the Athenian dramatist Euripides told an extended oracle story in his tragedy *Ion*, a drama set in Delphi that takes the consultation of the oracle by one of its central characters as its point of departure.

Two strands of interpretation emerge from the reading of this drama: the first concerns the way in which the drama serves as a commentary on religion and on human–divine communication in particular. As such, the drama puts the focus squarely on the way humans seek to interpret oracles as though they had a single meaning – as if the challenge was only to find the right one – and depicts in strong relief how gods and oracles really work in the world. The second strand concerns a particular area of human ideology and the generation of meaning: I have shown that the drama deconstructs Athenian notions of privileged access to citizenship. It does so partly through the tragic entanglements to which the central characters are exposed, partly by challenging the Athenian myth of origin.

What remains to be done now in terms of a conclusion is to draw out some of the more general points this chapter has raised about the telling of oracle stories in Greek tragedy. We found that, in particular, dramatic dialogue and the possibility it harbours for representing different viewpoints add to Delphic oracle stories as narratives about human–divine communication. Moreover, Euripides, in the *Ion*, refers to the major themes of oracle as they emerged in the previous two chapters, illustrating remarkable consistency in these tales as a group of texts and pointing to their capacity to transcend different genres of Greek literature.

The sincerity with which the human characters within the story seek to interpret Apollo's words again confirms the place

of the oracle as a powerful voice in Greek culture and society. Yet, at the same time, Euripides also urges us to think critically on how meaning is generated in the human sphere. By inverting some of the conventions that oracle stories usually follow, Euripides inspires his audience in particular to reflect on human constructs of the divine *qua* narrative. He in effect offers the possibility of an ironic reading, which exposes the telling of oracle stories as a profoundly human affair with very little of the divine in it. Even though the *Ion* and the oracle story it tells obviously belong to the realm of the imaginary, it provides us with a very real message of historico-cultural and religious significance.

CHAPTER 4

PLATO

Socrates, or Invoking the Oracle as a Witness

Introduction

The basic facts of the case are well established: in 399 BCE Socrates, then in his seventieth year and arguably Athens' most (in)famous philosopher, was accused of impiety (*asebeia*) as well as of corrupting the youth.¹ He was tried in front of a citizen jury of 501 judges, found guilty and sentenced to capital punishment.² He was executed by hemlock in the presence of some of his closest friends and admirers. With his death Athens lost an illustrious public figure and an intellectual who, for decades, had been a feature of public life in the city.³

Plato and Xenophon, both students and admirers of Socrates, tell the story of his trial. Their respective *Apologies* are accounts of Socrates' defence at court – if one may want to call it that. As some scholars (and indeed Xenophon himself) have pointed out, Socrates' address to the citizen jury borders at times on the

¹ More precisely he was accused of not acknowledging (*nomizein*) the gods of the city, of introducing new divinities and of corrupting the youth (see in detail McPherran 1996: 85–90). There is considerable debate about the question what exactly may be at the heart of the Socrates' alleged *asebeia*. See e.g. Vlastos 1991 who suggests that it is due to Socrates' rationalisation of divinity vs van Riel 2005: 32–42 who argues that it was the fact that Socrates 'internalized' (and hence 'personalized' and 'privatized') a powerful divine voice which would have disagreed with his contemporaries. McPherran 1996: 130–74 argues that Socrates' indictment and final conviction seem religiously 'overdetermined' (172). See Cartledge 2009: 76–90 for a reading of the trial that combines religious and political motivations.

² On Socrates' trial (and its representation in Plato's *Apology*) see e.g. Fox 1955; Finley 1968; Allen 1975; Stone 1988; Reeve 1989; Connor 1991; Brickhouse 1992; Roberts 1994; Hansen 1995; Parker 1996: 199–207; Rubel 2000: 342–63; Giordano-Zecharya 2005; Millett 2005; Jones 2013. On the charges see Brickhouse 1992; McPherran 1996: 85–90. On Plato's own religion see Morgan, 1990.

³ On Socrates and Athens: Finley 1968; Kraut 1984; Irwin 1989.

offensive and frivolous, in many ways confirming the prejudice held against him.⁴ Overall his speech at court seems to have antagonised rather than appeased the jury, with the result that a majority of jurors (albeit a relatively slim one) found him guilty as charged and an even greater number of jury members subsequently condemned him to death.

Plato's account is much more detailed than Xenophon's, stretching over thirty-five pages in the *OCT* edition (Xenophon's, by contrast, covers a mere eight and a half *OCT* pages).⁵ Plato was himself present at the trial and so able to give a first-hand account of the proceedings.⁶ Yet his *Apology* is by no means a verbatim report of Socrates' words spoken at court. His text ultimately offers a narration of Socrates' address in light of his subsequent conviction and Plato's very own personal interest in presenting his teacher in a positive light.⁷ So while large parts of Plato's *Apology* look like a forensic speech, the dialogue offers perhaps above all an account of Socratic ethics from Plato's point of view.

In his appearance at court, Plato's Socrates variously refers to an oracle he allegedly received at Delphi many years earlier.⁸ Apparently his friend Chaerephon had once consulted the Pythia with the question whether anyone was wiser than Socrates.⁹ The oracle, which Socrates summarises for us only indirectly, without quoting it verbatim, had allegedly responded that nobody was wiser.¹⁰ The crux of this response – as with other Delphic oracles featuring in Greek storytelling – is, of course, that it conceals

⁴ See e.g. Seeskin 1982. See also X. *Ap.* 1.1. See also Plato's Socrates, who acknowledges after he was found guilty as charged that he has apparently not chosen the right words to move his audience: Pl. *Ap.* 38D–E.

⁵ On Xenophon's Socrates: Wellmann 1976.

⁶ Pl. *Ap.* 34A, 38B.

⁷ Van Riel 2005: 31.

⁸ See e.g. P. *Ap.* 20E–21A with (amongst others) Elmore 1907; Parke 1961; De Stricker 1975; McPherran 1996: 208–32; van Riel 2005; Trampedach 2015: 277–81.

⁹ Pl. *Ap.* 21A. Bussanich 2013: 203 gives c. 430 BCE as the likely date of the oracle consultation. See also Stokes 1992: 52–4.

¹⁰ Xenophon (*Apol.* 14.) has a more elaborate version of the oracle according to which the god stated that no man was more free, just or prudent than Socrates. See Stokes 1992: 56–8 on similarities and differences between the oracles allegedly delivered to Chaerephon in Plato's and Xenophon's accounts of the trial. For other attestations of this response see Fontenrose 1978: 245–6.

just as much as it reveals.¹¹ In truly oracular fashion the response left open the respect in which the philosopher was indeed *sophos* (wise), and because Socrates did not consider himself particularly knowledgeable, he was puzzled by the oracle's response.¹²

Much of the presentation of the response in Plato's *Apology* therefore revolves around the question of what the oracle means.¹³ Socrates goes to great length to investigate what his outstanding wisdom entails and to report extensively to the jury how he went about it. To this end, he tells the jury that he questioned a number of people well known for their expertise in a particular area, including politicians, poets and artisans. To his great surprise, he finds that the oracle is indeed correct because there is one way in which he really is wiser than these experts: while his knowledge includes insight into its own limits, they universalise their limited expertise in a particular area, applying it beyond its boundaries.¹⁴

Classical scholars have extensively debated the significance of the response in the context of the *Apology* and Socrates' life more generally.¹⁵ Did the oracle really initiate Socrates' philosophical career as Plato's account of the trial seems to suggest?¹⁶ How does his belief in oracles and omens reflect on the critically enquiring Socrates we know?¹⁷ In finding answers to these and other questions pertaining to Socrates' use of the oracular, scholars have repeatedly touched upon the question of the historicity of the response.¹⁸ Indeed, debates about the Delphic oracle and Socrates' wisdom can serve as a prime

¹¹ On the enigmatic mode of oracles see Kindt 2008; Kindt *forthcoming*.

¹² At least if we believe that Socrates really meant what he said and wasn't making use of Socratic irony here (as argued, for example, by Gulley 1968: 69). See Vlastos 1985 for a critique of this position as well as the one which holds that Socrates' words on his knowledge should be taken at face value. On the ambiguity of the oracle see McPherran 1996: 123–7.

¹³ Pl. *Ap.* 21A–23C.

¹⁴ Pl. *Ap.* 21B–23C.

¹⁵ To the extent that some of them have sought to reconstruct the original wording of the prophecy. See e.g. Fagan and Russon 2009: xiii.

¹⁶ On this question: McPherran 1996: 120.

¹⁷ See e.g. de Strycker 1975: 44–7; Brisson 1990: 12; McPherran 2005: 15, 18; Cohen de Lara 2007: 193; Morgan 2010: 65.

¹⁸ The most comprehensive discussion of this question to date is Stokes 1992: 51–68.

example of what is at stake in questions of authenticity – and their ultimate futility (see [chapter 1](#) of this book for more detail).

Some scholars claim that the oracle is not historical and has been inserted into the Socratic tradition only later, possibly by Plato himself.¹⁹ They argue that the way in which Plato's Socrates introduces the oracle into his courtroom speech as some kind of surprise witness (see below) shows that the prophecy was not widely known at Athens during the time of the trial. This point is then frequently taken to challenge the veracity of Plato's account and of the pious Socrates it seems to depict.²⁰

Others, however, argue for the historicity of the oracle given to Chaerephon. They have pointed out that Plato would have been unable to invent such a prominent detail about Socrates without compromising the credibility of his entire account of the trial in the eyes of his Athenian audience, many of whom would have been present at the trial.²¹ With the authenticity of the response thus established, the historicity of the oracle is then taken as evidence for the historical accuracy of Plato's depiction of Socrates. From this point of view, the oracle also provides a direct indication of the nature of Socratic piety and of the philosopher's relationship to the Greek gods.²²

Like the other chapters of this book, this chapter seeks to sideline questions of authenticity. Instead, it foregrounds other questions, which follow the flow of the oracular discourse rather than reading against it. More specifically the chapter raises an issue that has not been discussed in much scholarship to date: the *representation* of the oracular discourse in

¹⁹ See e.g. Montuori 1990; Stokes 1992: 62–8; Vander Waerdt 1993 *contra* Brickhouse and Smith 1989: 88–91. For a middling position (Plato elaborated an existing report) see Daniel and Polanski 1979.

²⁰ E.g. Daniel and Polanski 1979.

²¹ E.g. Fontenrose 1978: 245–6 lists it as a 'historical' response, suggesting that it is likely to be 'authentic'. For arguments about the historicity of the response see also de Strycker 1975: 40. If the oracle was indeed historical, it would be – in the tongue-in-cheek words of Michael Stokes – 'the best kept secret of a lifetime' (Stokes 1992: 55).

²² On Socrates' piety see e.g. Daniel and Polanski 1979: 84; Brickhouse and Smith 1989: 30; McPherran 1996: 29–82.

Plato's *Apology* in itself and in relation to the oracular genre more widely.²³ Again the focus is on the storytelling aspect, here with the added twist that we are dealing with an oracle story (told by Socrates) within a story (Plato's account of the trial).

How did Plato's Socrates 'work' the Delphic oracle as part of his overall strategy at court? As I will illustrate throughout this chapter, the oracle story Socrates tells within the framework of Plato's *Apology* provides important clues as to the overall interpretation of the text.²⁴ I show how Plato's Socrates, in his presentation of the oracular as part of his court appearance, draws on the same features of oracle stories we have already encountered in the previous chapters of this book. I investigate how this aspect of the text (Socrates' reliance on the oracular) influences our reading of the *Apology*. I argue that the oracular connects the major aspects of Socrates' particular way of practising philosophy and presents them in a larger metaphysical framework, helping us understand the particular nature of Socratic wisdom in the context of other forms of human knowledge.²⁵ It also encourages us to look at his elenctic method of philosophical examination in the context of the principles and practices of human interpretation more generally.²⁶ Finally, it also allows us to appreciate his special connection to the divine within the larger framework of ancient Greek conceptions of the human–divine relationship. Overall, then, the oracular provides an important key to our understanding of what Socrates sets out to do in Plato's *Apology*.

²³ The most prominent treatment of this question so far is offered by Stokes 1992 (see in more detail below).

²⁴ The main focus of this chapter is therefore on Plato's *Apology*, but Xenophon's *Apology* as well as other supplementary sources (most notably Aristophanes' *Clouds*) will be referred to as comparative material because they help to shed light on the presentation of the oracular discourse in this particular text and the larger real-life context it claims to represent.

²⁵ I say 'forms of knowledge' because classical scholars have variously shown that different ways of knowing are at stake here. See e.g. Vlastos 1985; Hinske 2003; Forster 2007.

²⁶ McPherran 1996: 114–15 succinctly describes the *elenchus* as a scholarly term for the 'process of cross-examination' by which 'Socrates intends to care for and

Socratic Wisdom and the Nature of Human Knowledge

The oracular makes a surprise appearance at court towards the beginning of the *Apology*. Socrates has just named the general prejudices against him according to which he was a sophist, a self-professed expert who took money for his teaching and who circulated all sort of corroborating theories about matters of general importance (including the nature of the gods).²⁷ He has just pointed out that, contrary to this opinion, he is not a sophist: not only does he not take money for his teaching as a sophist would, he also does not advance any positive theories of his own, about the nature of divinity or anything else. Indeed, as he variously emphasises, his teaching merely consists of *a method* of investigating others:²⁸ ‘I ask questions, and whoever wishes may answer and hear what I say... I never promised or gave any instruction to any of them.’²⁹ Now he declares that his bad reputation is ultimately due to a certain kind of wisdom (*sophia*), a kind of wisdom that should not be confused with the knowledge of the sophists.

To substantiate this claim he somewhat pompously announces that he will call upon a particularly authoritative witness:

καὶ μοι, ὦ ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι, μὴ θορυβήσητε, μηδ' ἐὰν δόξω τι ὑμῖν μέγα λέγειν· οὐ γὰρ ἐμὸν ἔρω τὸν λόγον ὃν ἂν λέγω, ἀλλ' εἰς ἀξιόχρεων ὑμῖν τὸν λέγοντα ἀνοίσω. τῆς γὰρ ἐμῆς, εἰ δὴ τίς ἐστιν σοφία καὶ οἶα, μάρτυρα ὑμῖν παρέξομαι τὸν θεὸν τὸν ἐν Δελφοῖς.

‘And, men of Athens, do not interrupt me with noise, even if I seem to you to be boasting; for the word which I speak is not mine, but the speaker to whom I shall refer is a person of weight. For of my wisdom – if it is wisdom at all – and of its nature, I will offer you the god of Delphi as a witness.’³⁰

improve both himself and his fellow Athenians’. On the *elenchus* see also Stokes 1992: 26; Brickhouse and Smith 1994: 10–15.

²⁷ So the prejudice held against them at Athens. On the teaching of the sophists see e.g. Kerferd 1981; Barney 2006.

²⁸ On the question of Socrates’ method see e.g. Brickhouse and Smith 2002.

²⁹ Pl. *Ap.* 33B.

³⁰ Pl. *Ap.* 20E. Throughout this chapter I have used the translation of H. N. Fowler 1914. I have made changes where necessary.

That any philosopher worth his salt is by definition *wise* (whatever that may mean) should not be a controversial issue.³¹ To explain how this could become an issue of legal interest and courtroom contestation, however, Socrates himself points towards Aristophanes and others who present him as a sophist. In Aristophanes' *Clouds*, he indeed features as a slightly odd creature who teaches the gullible all sorts of useless or potentially dangerous things, including how many feet a flea can jump and that the sun is not divine but actually a stone.³²

What follows, then, is a detailed account of Chaerephon's consultation of the Delphic oracle in terms of the question he asked, the response he received and the efforts it took Socrates himself to find the meaning. Significantly, perhaps, the veracity of the response is never really questioned. As Socrates himself states: 'What then does he mean by declaring that I am the wisest? He certainly cannot be lying (οὐ γὰρ δῆπου ψεύδεται γέ), for that is not possible for him.'³³ Yet at the same time, Socrates is convinced of his ignorance. Plato's *Apology* hence starts from the very point that many other of his dialogues only reach in lieu of a conclusion: an apparently insolvable *aporia* ('perplexity', 'doubt'), which here does not prevent further discussion but, on the contrary, instigates Socrates' subsequent enquiry into the true meaning of the response.³⁴

Some modern commentators have noted in passing that the oracle Chaerephon allegedly asked at Delphi resonates with a number of similar oracle enquiries reported elsewhere.³⁵ The extent to which the oracle story told by Plato's Socrates evokes the oracular tradition more widely, however, has not been the subject of a systematic scholarly analysis so far. The most comprehensive treatment of this issue is offered by Michael Stokes.³⁶ Yet in his excellent close reading of Plato's *Apology*, he presents this possibility more as an

³¹ On the nature of Socrates' wisdom see Stokes 1992: 28–9.

³² A flea's jumping distance: Ar. *Nu.* 143–52, 831. The sun is a stone: P. *Ap.* 26D. On Aristophanes' Socrates: e.g. Neumann 1969; Dover 1971; Karavites 1973–4; Nussbaum 1980; Edmunds 1985, McPherran 1996: 90–104.

³³ Pl. *Ap.* 21B.

³⁴ As noticed by Morgan 2010: 66.

³⁵ E.g. de Strycker 1975: 42; Daniel and Polanski 1979: 83; Bussanich 2013: 201.

³⁶ Stokes 1992: 60–2.

outcome of his enquiry than as a pathway into a new reading of the *Apology*. Developing observations first made by Stokes, I will show below that the story Plato's Socrates tells the citizen jury derives much of its meaning through a more or less open engagement with the oracular genre.

As Stokes and other classical scholars have pointed out, a number of oracle stories reported elsewhere in Greek thought and literature feature the human desire for the god to pass some sort of judgement on how a particular human being ranks in terms of a certain desirable criterion – happiness, wealth or, in this case, wisdom.³⁷ We may for example think again of Croesus, who asked Solon – not, strictly speaking, an oracle but certainly an oracular voice in the *Histories* – who was the most 'blessed' (*olbiōtaton*) person in the world. Contrary to his expectation, Solon did not name Croesus, but first King Tellus of Athens and then Cleobis and Biton (who rank more highly because they have all died a meaningful death: Croesus cannot yet know how he is going to end).³⁸ Or we may recall the story of King Gyges of Lydia, who apparently also enquired at Delphi whether anyone else was happier than he himself and who apparently received the – doubtless disappointing – response that a poor farmer, Aglaus of Psophis, was happier.³⁹ We may also consider the story of Anacharsis of Scythia (or Chilon of Sparta), who consulted the oracle at Delphi with the very same question Chaerephon allegedly asked about

³⁷ Here and below see Stokes 1992: 60–2; McPherran 1996: 217. That the oracle story Socrates tells directly alludes to what one may want to call the 'who-comes-first theme' is brought out even more prominently in Xenophon's version of the story, according to which the oracle responded that no man was more free-spirited (*eleutheriōteron*), juster (*dikaiōteron*) or, indeed, more prudent (*sōphronēsteron*) than he (X. *Ap.* 14).

³⁸ See Hdt. 1.30–3. Tellus ruled over a prosperous city, had fathered two noble sons, who in turn had offspring, and who above all died a glorious death in battle. Cleobis and Biton likewise died a glorious death. In the absence of oxen they had pulled the cart carrying their mother to the temple of Hera at Argos. According to Herodotus' Solon, it follows, one cannot evaluate one's happiness oneself. Happiness can be evaluated only in hindsight, for example by the historian. I would like to thank Aishwarya Laskshmi for this observation. On the Herodotean figure of the 'wise advisor' and his closeness to the oracular see Lattimore 1939.

³⁹ Plin. *HN* 7.46.151; Val. Max. 7.1.2.; Musonius *ap.* Stob. *Flor.* 56.18. with Fontenrose 1978: 301 (Q97).

Socrates: whether anyone was wiser.⁴⁰ He, too, found his hopes disappointed when he received the response that Myson in Chen (again a simple peasant) was wisest.

The point of the story is of course always the same: the person who asks the question expects to be named himself – using the god merely to confirm (and thereby in effect endorse) his outstanding position. Yet typically in such stories, those enquiring ultimately find their expectations disappointed when the oracle names someone else instead. The obvious moral of these stories is that it is by no means always and necessarily the rich and powerful who rank highest on the scale of human happiness, wisdom, etc. On the contrary, those at the other end of the scale may do just as well, or even better.

Indeed, it is rarely, if ever, those who believe they rank highest who end up coming out on top, as the example of the city of Aegion in Achaea proves. Apparently the citizens of the city enquired at Delphi about who were the better Hellenes after they had made generous offerings to Apollo following a victory over the Aetolians. They will have certainly been disappointed when they heard that several other Greek cities featured more highly than them on different counts (including the quality of their land, horses and women).⁴¹

In Socrates' instance, however, as Stokes has first observed, the story runs along slightly different lines.⁴² The first deviation from the usual story pattern is merely incidental: it is not Socrates himself who asks about his ranking on the scale of human wisdom, but his friend Chaerephon, who, we sense, acts out of his own curiosity and not in collusion with (or even on behalf of) Socrates. The second difference is more profound and leads us straight to the core of what Plato's Socrates hopes to achieve by invoking the authority of the Delphic oracle in the court room. Unlike in those other cases, in which the oracle immediately deflates the expectations of the enquirers,

⁴⁰ Eudoxus of Cnidus and Euanthes of Miletus *ap.* D.L. 1.1.30. See also Diod. 9.5.2, D.L. 1.9.106–7, Paus. 1.22.8 with Fontenrose 1978: 293 (Q75).

⁴¹ See e.g. Mnaseas 3.157 M. *ap.* Phot. Lex. 2.238 (Theodoridis) = *ap.* Sud. Y 108. See also Oinomaos *ap.* Eus. *PE* 5.29; Ath. 7.278E with Fontenrose 1978: 276 (Q26).

⁴² Stokes 1992: 60–2.

Chaerephon actually seems to receive the response he had hoped for, the one in some sense at least already implied in the question: that indeed nobody was wiser than Socrates.

So is Socrates just another human being who, like Croesus, adopts a hybriatic stance and falls for the deceptive qualities of oracles by assuming he understands perfectly what they mean? Chaerephon's consultation at Delphi evokes a number of other, similar stories, so this question is certainly flagged as significant. Not only for the internal audience of the text – the citizen jury and others present at court – but also and in particular Plato's own readership, the audience of the *Apology*, who would have been familiar with such tales.

In some way, then, the oracle story told by Socrates first raises the question whether the philosopher is just as hybriatic in his dealings with the oracle, as were so many other recipients of enigmatic oracles, a question which certainly reverberated in the context of the trial. This is underlined even more by Socrates' pompous introduction of the oracular voice into the courtroom (see above).

Yet, as we shall see, Socrates raises this question only to dismiss it. For the way in which he describes his response to hearing about the oracle is a distinct effort to deviate from the usual pattern of such stories: rather than accepting the oracle at face value, as the typical hybriatic oracle consultant would have done, he recognises and acknowledges the vagueness in Apollo's response. Rather than rejoicing in what looks like a divine endorsement of his outstanding wisdom, he continues to stress his own ignorance.⁴³ Rather than accepting the obvious meaning of the oracle, Socrates asks the right follow up questions: 'What in the world does the god mean, and what riddle is he propounding (τί ποτε αἰνίττεται)?'⁴⁴ For I am conscious that I am not wise either much or little. What then does he mean by declaring that I am the wisest (φάσκων ἐμὲ σοφώτατον εἶναι)?⁴⁵

⁴³ See Pl. *Ap.* 21B.

⁴⁴ Pl. *Ap.* 21B. Cf. Herodotus' Croesus, who is openly reminded by the Delphic oracle that he should have put a follow-up question to the oracle enquiring into which empire was going to be destroyed (Hdt. 1.91).

⁴⁵ Pl. *Ap.* 21B.

Note that Socrates here misrepresents slightly the oracular response: according to his own prior account, the oracle had not actually said that he was wisest (*sophōtatos*), but that nobody was wiser (*sophōteros*) than he – leaving open the possibility of someone being as wise as Socrates. Of course this is just a subtle difference. Yet it is all the more noticeable because elsewhere, whenever Socrates examines his own reasoning and that of others, it is Socrates himself who is extremely careful about such minute differences, insisting that they actually matter. Again it is the possibility of manipulating the oracular in line with one's own experiences and expectations which is alluded to here.⁴⁶

Yet in contrast to many other human protagonists of Delphic oracle stories, Plato's Socrates is conscious of the ontological gap that separates the human and divine spheres. This gap manifests itself, for example, in differences between human and divine perspective, human and divine language, and human and divine knowledge (see [chapter 1](#) in detail). At some point Socrates seems to state directly this difference between human and divine knowledge when he elaborates on the nature of his own wisdom:

ποίαν δὴ σοφίαν ταύτην; ἥπερ ἐστὶν ἴσως ἀνθρωπίνη σοφία· τῷ ὄντι γὰρ κινδυνεύω ταύτην εἶναι σοφός. οὗτοι δὲ τάχ' ἄν, οὓς ἄρτι ἔλεγον, μείζω τινὰ ἢ κατ' ἀνθρώπων σοφίαν σοφοὶ εἶεν, ἢ οὐκ ἔχω τί λέγω· οὐ γὰρ δὴ ἔγωγε αὐτὴν ἐπίσταμαι, ἀλλ' ὅστις φησὶ ψεύδεται τε καὶ ἐπὶ διαβολῇ τῇ ἐμῇ λέγει.

'What kind of wisdom is this? Just that which is perhaps human wisdom. For perhaps I really am wise in this wisdom; and these men, perhaps, of whom I was just speaking, might be wise in some wisdom greater than human wisdom, or I don't know what to say; for I don't understand it, and whoever says I do, is lying and speaking to arouse prejudice against me.'⁴⁷

What Socrates is saying here is that those human beings who misrepresent the nature of his quintessentially human wisdom

⁴⁶ McPherran 1996: 138–9 suggests that Socrates comes to believe that he is indeed wisest of all because 'he, of all Athenians, has achieved the highest level of self-understanding, knowledge, and skill requisite to performing this labor in satisfaction of our general pious obligation'.

⁴⁷ Pl. *Ap.* 20D–E. The suggestion that his antagonists may be lying is in contrast here to Socrates' earlier statement about Apollo's oracle which itself cannot lie (see above with Pl. *Ap.* 12B).

seem to claim some sort of superhuman knowledge for themselves. For they believe (or at least pretend) they are able to detect a meaning in the oracular response that he himself as a human being with only human knowledge cannot possibly grasp. We will return to this point in the last section of this chapter. Meanwhile, however, we may note in passing how, in the passage just quoted, accusations of *hybris* have shifted from being against Socrates to against his accusers.

Of course the possibility of human beings gaining some sort of superhuman wisdom remains strictly rhetorical. During his subsequent enquiry into the scope and limits of human knowledge, Socrates finds that even those human beings who appear to be wise (prophets who say inherently knowledgeable things) really ‘know’ in a fundamental metaphysical sense.⁴⁸ Classical scholars have rightly pointed out that in this iconic passage Socrates is distinguishing ‘true belief’ (resulting from divine inspiration) from real knowledge.⁴⁹

ἔγνω οὖν αὐ καὶ περὶ τῶν ποιητῶν ἐν ὀλίγῳ τοῦτο, ὅτι οὐ σοφίᾳ ποιοῖεν ἃ ποιοῖεν, ἀλλὰ φύσει τινὶ καὶ ἐνθουσιάζοντες ὥσπερ οἱ θεομάντεις καὶ οἱ χρησμωδοί· καὶ γὰρ οὗτοι λέγουσι μὲν πολλὰ καὶ καλὰ, ἴσασιν δὲ οὐδὲν ὧν λέγουσι. τοιοῦτόν τί μοι ἐφάνησαν πάθος καὶ οἱ ποιηταὶ πεπονθότες ...

‘So again in the case of the poets also I presently recognised this, that what they composed they composed not by wisdom, but by nature and because they were inspired, like the prophets and givers of oracles; for these also say many fine things, but know none of the things they say; it was evident to me that the poets too had experienced something of this sort.’⁵⁰

Even poets (and prophets), it seems, cannot ultimately claim credit for the insights their works offer.

Socrates here borrows the concept of mantic and poetic inspiration from Greek thought and literature and incorporates it into an argument about the limited knowledge of poets

⁴⁸ This also applies also to the practical (technical) knowledge of artisans and other experts at manual work, which remains limited to that part of the human world from which it was derived, despite all tendencies of those who have this knowledge to universalise it by applying it more widely (see *Pl. Ap.* 22D–E).

⁴⁹ Forster 2007: 9 argues that Socrates considers his own ethic to be divinely inspired ‘true belief’, thus dissolving the potential contradiction between his stated ignorance and his apparent ethical insights.

⁵⁰ *Pl. Ap.* 22B–C.

and prophets. This allows him to keep the human and divine spheres strictly separate in terms of the kind of wisdom available to them.⁵¹ The philosopher makes a rather strong difference between the obviously thoughtful words of poets and prophets and the real wisdom of their speakers: while the words reflect nature and divine inspiration, the speakers are merely human with all the restrictions to their knowledge that apply.

The introduction of the oracular voice into the courtroom allows Socrates above all to expound on the nature of his own wisdom in the context of the scope and limits of different kinds of human knowledge. Rather than advancing corroborating theories about the nature of the gods and teaching humans ‘how to make the weaker argument the stronger’ – as his accusers claim and as he is sketched in Athenian popular culture – he is conscious of the obvious limits to human wisdom and uses his appearance at court as an opportunity to elaborate on his views in this area.⁵²

The Elenctic Method of Investigation in the Context of Human Interpretation

So rather than following people like Croesus ([chapter 2](#)) and Xuthus ([chapter 3](#)) in taking the oracle at face value, Socrates sets out to enquire into its true meaning. The focus of Socrates’ account in the *Apology* now shifts: away from the ontological speculation about the nature of the divine and the differences between human and divine wisdom, and towards an exposition of how human knowledge is derived.

Indeed, Socrates goes to considerable length to explain the process by which he gains insight into the oracle’s meaning. The way in which he proceeds – investigating all sorts of experts and proving the limits of their knowledge along the lines described above – confirms that he is not much interested in handing out ready-made portions of knowledge. Rather,

⁵¹ On the link between poetry and prophecy in Greek thought and literature more generally see Nagy 1990.

⁵² See Pl. *Ap.* 23D.

he seeks to propagate a certain *way* or *method* of *knowing*. There is a deep congruence between oracle stories and Socratic philosophy because both focus upon the *process of knowing*. I would argue that this congruence is at the very core of why the oracular features so prominently in Socrates' courtroom speech. The oracular literally lends itself to an enquiry into (or an exemplification of?) the elenctic method of practising philosophy: both the interpretation of oracles (as depicted in oracle stories) and Socrates' method of investigation (as depicted by Plato) ultimately aim at unmasking human ignorance; both are based on a dialogical approximation of truth; both are ultimately directed towards a deeper insight into the nature of things.

It follows that there is no contradiction between the rational and the religious Socrates, or between Socratic reason and divine revelation, as has sometimes been argued.⁵³ Indeed, the philosopher's enquiry into the meaning of the oracle demonstrates that ancient Greek religion embraced rational human reasoning – above all perhaps in the systematic interpretation of oracles – just as philosophy itself embraced the religious discourse of the ancient world in various ways, not least in order to highlight metaphysical aspects of the human condition. From this point of view, the oracle story that Plato's Socrates tells to the audience of his jurors and supporters focuses on how reason and revelation intersect.

To explore the synergies between the oracular discourse and his way of practising philosophy, Plato's Socrates combines three *a priori* separate acts of interpretation and explanation. First, he makes his performance at court an instance of his elenctic method of philosophical investigation. Second, his subsequent demonstration of his way of doing philosophy is made to coincide with the interpretation of the oracle. Third, Socrates argues that the gods have chosen him merely as an example, a 'paradigm', in order to teach humans about the limits of human knowledge, in particular if it exceeds the

⁵³ This position is discussed in detail in McPherran 1991 (with further literature).

practical knowledge of certain experts and the inspired knowledge of poets and prophets.⁵⁴

To start from the first point: in particular towards the beginning of the *Apology*, to condition his audience's reception of what he will say later on, Socrates repeatedly emphasises that his way of speaking and reasoning at court exemplifies the way in which he usually goes about examining people: 'And, men of Athens, I urgently beg and beseech you if you hear me making my defence with the same words with which I have been accustomed to speak (ἐὰν διὰ τῶν αὐτῶν λόγων ἀκούητέ μου ἀπολογουμένου δι' ὧν περ εἶωθα λέγειν) both in the market place at the bankers' tables, where many of you have heard me, and elsewhere, not to be surprised or to make a disturbance on this account.'⁵⁵ The jury, therefore, will be able to form an opinion about the nature of Socrates' teaching not just from how it features in the conflicting claims of Socrates and his accusers but also, and in particular, by considering the way in which the philosopher presents himself at court.

Second, the subsequent exposition of his method of philosophical examination coincides with the enquiry into the oracle's meaning. The oracle does not just endorse Socrates' outstanding wisdom by explicitly confirming it but also allows (perhaps even begs) the philosopher to exemplify the way in which his knowledge is derived.⁵⁶ The oracle therefore provides a positive yet semantically under-determined statement, which requires investigation to make sense. As a result, Socrates can showcase his method of investigation by applying it to a matter of highest importance – a divine utterance. What is really at stake in his efforts to 'test' the oracle is a 'test' of his own method of teaching and its success in interpreting what is arguably the highest kind of knowledge there is – divine knowledge.

⁵⁴ Socrates as a 'paradigm': McPherran 1996: 136; Daniel and Polanski 1979: 85; Stokes 1992: 44–50. See Hinske 2003 on Socrates' distinction between these different kinds of human knowledge and the danger of universalising his statements on human ignorance to apply to all human knowledge.

⁵⁵ Pl. *Ap.* 17C. See also Pl. *Ap.* 27B.

⁵⁶ Contra McPherran 1996: 118, who points out that the oracle is not 'prescriptive' but 'descriptive'.

As a result, a direct analogy between the interpretation of the oracle and Socrates' method of philosophical investigation is established, an analogy which proves invariably productive and revealing: just like the examination of the truthfulness of the oracle, Socrates' philosophical mission is never final, never complete. There could be absolute certainty as to whether the oracle was indeed right to say that nobody was wiser than Socrates only if the philosopher had indeed investigated *all* human beings – an impossible task.

The paradoxical is never far away in this analogy between the oracular and the philosophical: the philosopher ultimately proves the irrefutability of the god by refuting his own prior assumption and that of his fellow human beings.⁵⁷ Moreover, insights into the nature of Socrates' wisdom remain linked to his efforts to prove wrong the oracle that actually confirms it. At the same time, the oracle's authority is continuously confirmed in the process of Socratic investigation, due to the cumulative nature of the philosopher's insights into the nature of his own wisdom and the limits of that of others.

As a welcome spin-off of the connection established between Socratic philosophy on the one hand and the interpretation of the oracle on the other, Socrates is able to claim that the god at Delphi put him on a mission to practise philosophy, as he repeated throughout his speech: 'For know that the god commands me to do this, and I believe that no greater good ever came to pass in the city than my service to the god.'⁵⁸ As human investigation is needed to bring out the meaning of the prophecy, Socratic teaching becomes a necessity: 'Therefore I am still even now going about and searching and investigating at the god's behest anyone, whether citizen or foreigner, who I think is wise; and when he does not seem so to me, I give aid to the god (τῷ θεῷ βοηθῶν) and show that he is not wise.'⁵⁹ Elsewhere Socrates states that it was not just the oracle that urged him on

⁵⁷ On oracles describing conditions that are seemingly impossible to fulfil see Dougherty 1993a: 45ff.

⁵⁸ Pl. *Ap.* 30 A.

⁵⁹ Pl. *Ap.* 23B. Throughout Socrates' court appearance his appeals to the divine authority behind his 'mission' become ever more urgent, ultimately even anticipating

in this respect, but that the god (presumably Apollo himself) advised him to do so ‘through oracles and dreams and in every way in which any man was ever commanded by divine power to do anything whatsoever’.⁶⁰ One form of mantic authority here authenticates and authorises the other in a manner similar to the one we see at work in a number of other oracle stories.⁶¹

The image Socrates creates of his teaching is just as powerful as the image of the midwife used elsewhere: just as Socrates, like a midwife, helps his fellow citizens to ‘deliver’ knowledge, he assists in the full delivery of divine knowledge by investigating other human beings.⁶² The point is, of course, that this is very different from the idiosyncratic, self-promoting kind of skills propagated by the sophists. The picture of a humble Socrates emerges, much more like the Herodotean Solon than the Herodotean Croesus.⁶³

This brings us to the third point: the way in which Socrates serves as a device for the gods to reveal a more general truth. Plato’s Socrates suggests that in assigning him to this mission, which ultimately reflects on the scope and limits of human knowledge as soon as it exceeds technical knowledge or divinely inspired ‘true belief’, the gods merely use his persona as an *ex-emplum* to show that all human interpretation is fraught, and that human knowledge can therefore only ever be preliminary.⁶⁴

τὸ δὲ κινδυνεύει, ὧς ἄνδρες, τῷ ὄντι ὁ θεὸς σοφὸς εἶναι, καὶ ἐν τῷ χρησμῷ τούτῳ τοῦτο λέγειν, ὅτι ἡ ἀνθρωπίνη σοφία ὀλίγου τινὸς ἀξία ἐστὶν καὶ οὐδενός. καὶ φαίνεται τοῦτον λέγειν τὸν Σωκράτη, προσκεχρήσθαι δὲ τῷ ἐμῷ ὀνόματι, ἐμὲ παράδειγμα ποιούμενος, ὥσπερ ἂν <εἰ> εἴποι ὅτι “Οὗτος ὑμῶν, ὧς ἄνθρωποι, σοφώτατός ἐστιν, ὅστις ὥσπερ Σωκράτης ἐγνώκεν ὅτι οὐδενὸς ἀξίος ἐστὶ τῇ ἀληθείᾳ πρὸς σοφίαν.”

(and accepting) the possibility of a death penalty (see e.g. Pl. *Ap.* 28R–29A, 37E). Here and elsewhere the need to practise philosophy becomes a matter of service not just to the Athenians (as Socrates repeatedly points out) but to divinity itself.

⁶⁰ Pl. *Ap.* 33C.

⁶¹ See Bonnechere 2010 on the phenomenon of multiple, mutually reinforcing mantic statements (with further evidence).

⁶² Socrates’ midwifery: Ar. *Nu.* 135–7; Pl. *Tht.* 149D–151D with Tomin 1987; Sider 1991; Forster 2007 *contra* Tarrant 1998.

⁶³ The picture of the humble Socrates is also reinforced by the philosopher’s claims to poverty (see Pl. *Ap.* 23C).

⁶⁴ Stokes 1992: 44 speaks of ‘a paradigm, not just a mere instance’.

‘But the fact is, gentlemen, it is likely that the god is really wise and by that oracle means this: “Human wisdom is of little or no value.” And in speaking of Socrates here before you and in making use of my name he appears to make me an example, as if he were to say: “This one of you, O human beings, is wisest, who, like Socrates, recognises that he is in truth of no account in respect to wisdom.”’⁶⁵

In the end, Socrates does indeed emerge from his enquiry as wiser than the politicians, poets and craftsman he investigated, even if only regarding the limits of his own knowledge.⁶⁶ At the same time, as Socrates himself points out, he also emerges as a person disliked by many, presumably because nobody particularly enjoys being proven wrong and seeing their ‘knowledge’ dismantled.

What makes Socrates’ wisdom stand out is ultimately self-knowledge derived from a complex process examining himself and others.⁶⁷ In this sense the Delphic oracle story Socrates tells to the citizen jury during his trial confirms the ‘moral’ of numerous other oracle stories: it is a recurrent theme of the oracular discourse as discussed in this book that many protagonists learn the lesson of the limits of their knowledge rather painfully – as a result of their misinterpretation of the oracular utterance. The Delphic maxim ‘know thyself’ is applicable here, not just for the message Plato’s Socrates seeks to get across, but for the oracular genre more generally.⁶⁸ Incidentally, both Croesus of Lydia and Chilon of Sparta are said to have received a response at Delphi that came straight to the point by indicating that to ‘know thyself’ was best.⁶⁹ Plato’s Socrates offers a method for working towards that end.

To call upon the oracle as a witness gives Plato’s Socrates the opportunity to exemplify his method of philosophical

⁶⁵ P. *Ap.* 23A–B.

⁶⁶ As Stokes 1992: 56–7 succinctly puts it: ‘Socrates’ wisdom in Plato’s *Apology* is an awareness of ignorance; the ignorance has for its subject-matter the answers to moral questions, but is not itself a moral quality for praise or blame – rather a universal property of human beings.’

⁶⁷ On the nature of Socrates’ knowledge see also Vlastos 1985; van Riel 2005.

⁶⁸ On this maxim see Tortzen 2002.

⁶⁹ Croesus: X. *Cyr.* 7.2.20–5 with Fontenrose 1978: 303–4 (Q105). Chilon of Sparta: e.g. Aristotle frag. 3 Rose *ap.* Clem. Al. *Strom.* 1.351 with Fontenrose 1978: 294 (Q77).

investigation. It helps him to justify his teaching by presenting it in the context of the principles and practices of human interpretation more generally. To draw on ancient Greek thought about the limits of human knowledge compared to divine knowledge appears to be a clever, yet ultimately unsuccessful, move by Socrates in his attempt to explain himself and the nature of his philosophical mission.

Socrates, the Oracular, and the Human–Divine Relationship

In the first section of this chapter we have looked at how Socrates, in the course of his defence at court, tells an oracle story to elaborate on the differences between human and divine knowledge. In the second section, we have considered how he uses the same story to present his method of philosophical investigation in the larger context of the principles and practices of human interpretation. This leaves us with the most complex problem his courtroom appearance sought to address: the question of his relationship to the divine.

To invite Delphic Apollo, arguably the greatest authority of ancient Greek religion, into the courtroom to ‘speak up’ in support of his case, certainly constitutes an attempt by Socrates to refute accusations of *asebeia*.⁷⁰ Yet the oracle story he tells to the jury and to all those present in the courtroom on that day is by no means the only way in which Plato’s Socrates makes use of the oracular. Plato’s Socrates draws on the oracular discourse more widely in an attempt to clarify his relationship to the supernatural. His references to an inner oracular voice (‘the *daimonion*’) as well as his claims, towards the end of the *Apology*, to act himself as the speaker of prophecies, should be seen as an attempt by the philosopher to cast

⁷⁰ See Pl. *Ap.* 24C. What was really at stake in accusations of *asebeia* in general and in the case of Socrates in particular is notoriously hard to pin down. McPherran 2005 argues that Socrates was charged of *asebeia* because he internalised, personalised and privatised the supernatural. See also Bussanich 2013: 201 who emphasises the ‘practical piety’ of Socrates. In Plato’s *Euthyphro*, Socrates repeatedly states that he was accused of *asebeia* for innovating in religious matters: See e.g. 3B, 5A, 16A.

his personal ‘theology’ in terms of a religiosity with which the Athenians would be familiar.⁷¹

In some sense, this strategy is already apparent in the way Socrates presents his method of philosophical investigation as essential to the way in which divine meaning is revealed in the human sphere. As we have noted, Socrates likes to present himself as someone who merely helps to ‘deliver’ divine meaning. Indeed, it is revealing how carefully Plato’s Socrates treads to emphasise his respect towards Apollo and his oracle. When speculation about the nature of human and divine knowledge eventually gives way to an examination of what exactly Apollo means to say, Socrates introduces this change in focus by stating: ‘And for a long time I was at a loss as to what he meant; then, with great reluctance (μόγλις πάνυ) I proceeded to investigate him somewhat as follows.’⁷²

Why does Socrates emphasise that he is proceeding ‘with great reluctance’? Again what is highlighted here is his reference to the gods and their oracular utterances. While the philosopher is generally happy to investigate human beings (including himself), he is reluctant to apply the same method to the divine, lest this be perceived as disrespectful. Disrespectful because Socrates’ enquiry into the meaning of the oracle involves the attempt to prove the oracle wrong by finding someone who is actually wiser than Socrates.⁷³ What is stressed here is that Socrates’ investigation into the meaning of the prophecy is not to be misunderstood as just another attempt of a human being to ‘test’ the oracle. On the contrary, Socrates wants the jury (and the Athenian populace more widely) to see his enquiry into the meaning of the oracle – and the practice of philosophy he applies to this end – as the ultimate service to divinity and to humanity in the process.⁷⁴

Nowhere does this strategy become more evident than in Socrates’ invocation of an inner oracular voice – he refers to

⁷¹ On ancient Greek theology see Eidinow, Kindt and Osborne 2016. On ancient Greek personal religion (and philosophical religion as part of it) see Kindt 2015b.

⁷² Pl. *Ap.* 21B. On Socrates’ reluctance to examine the meaning of the oracle see also Stokes 1992: 40–1.

⁷³ See Pl. *Ap.* 21C.

⁷⁴ Pl. *Ap.* 30A–B.

it as a *daimonion* – that speaks to him directly in certain situations to prevent him engaging in immoral activities. In the *Apology* it is presented as the reason why the philosopher stands up for his form of teaching at court even though this hardly won favour from the jury.⁷⁵ He argues that because the inner voice did not prevent him from coming to court and acting as he did, there can be nothing wrong with it. After all, this voice has always been reliable in the past.

ή γάρ εἰωθυῖά μοι μαντική ή τοῦ δαιμονίου ἐν μέν τῷ πρόσθεν χρόνῳ παντὶ πάνυ πυκνὴ αἰὲ ἦν καὶ πάνυ ἐπὶ σμικροῖς ἐναντιουμένη, εἴ τι μέλλοιμι μὴ ὀρθῶς πράξειν. νυνὶ δὲ συμβέβηκέ μοι ἅπερ ὁρᾶτε καὶ αὐτοί, ταυτὶ ἄ γε δὴ οἰηθεῖν ἂν τις καὶ νομίζεται ἔσχατα κακῶν εἶναι· ἐμοὶ δὲ οὔτε ἐξίόντι ἔωθεν οἴκοθεν ἡναντιώθη τὸ τοῦ θεοῦ σημεῖον, οὔτε ἡνίκα ἀνέβαινον ἐνταυθοῖ ἐπὶ τὸ δικαστήριον, οὔτε ἐν τῷ λόγῳ οὔδαμοῦ μέλλοντι τι εἰρεῖν.

‘For hitherto the customary prophetic monitor always spoke to me very frequently and opposed me even in very small matters, if I was going to do anything I should not; but now, as you yourselves see, this thing which might be thought, and is generally considered, the greatest of evils has come upon me; but the divine sign did not oppose me either when I left my home in the morning, or when I came here to the court, at any point of my speech when I was about to say something.’⁷⁶

The nature of the *daimonion* belongs to the most difficult aspects of Socratic piety.⁷⁷ Classical scholars have struggled to explain it, sometimes interpreting it as Socrates’ inner conscience, sometimes as some sort of divine inner voice that seems to speak exclusively and directly to the philosopher.⁷⁸ In Xenophon’s *Apology*, Socrates tries to explain it away as equivalent to the birds and omens other people refer to; not so, however, in Plato’s *Apology*.⁷⁹ Here Socrates attempts to dress the new and personal in terms of a religious entity already

⁷⁵ See e.g. Pl. *Ap.* 41D.

⁷⁶ Pl. *Ap.* 40A–B.

⁷⁷ See e.g. Vlastos 1995: 28: ‘the gravest of the difficulties we all have to face in our effort to make sense of Socrates’. See also McPherran 2005, in particular 14–15.

⁷⁸ On Socrates’ *daimonion* see e.g. Gundert 1954; Brickhouse and Smith 2005; McPherran 2005.

⁷⁹ X. *Ap.* 12–13 with Van Riel 2005: 37, who argues that the *daimonion* in Xenophon’s account seems to have a more proactive, affirmative function than the way in which it is represented in Plato’s *Apology*, in which it merely prevents Socrates from taking certain actions that would bring him in conflict with his own moral values.

familiar to the Athenians: by calling it a *daimonion* – that aspect of the supernatural that always remained under-determined and ambiguous in its relationship to the Greek gods – Socrates attempts to make his inner voice intelligible to the Athenians.

Yet note how in the process of introducing this additional divine voice (which seems to be endorsed by Apollo)⁸⁰ the role of Socrates has changed: Socrates now really serves as a mouthpiece for the supernatural. His words are needed not merely to interpret but to articulate the divine. Yet we should not forget that it is merely a passive knowledge that comes to light here. The philosopher variously points out that the *daimonion* does not urge him on to do anything: it merely intervenes when his actions risk bringing him dangerously close to a (morally) undesired outcome.⁸¹

It is only towards the end of the *Apology* that Socrates prophesies in his own voice. Once the guilty verdict is reached and Socrates is condemned to death, the philosopher makes a strong point of adopting a quasi-oracular voice himself.

Τὸ δὲ δὴ μετὰ τοῦτο ἐπιθυμῶ ὑμῖν χρησμοδεῖσαι, ὧ καταψηφισάμενοί μου· καὶ γὰρ εἰμι ἤδη ἐνταῦθα ἐν ᾧ μάλιστα ἄνθρωποι χρησμοδοῦσιν, ὅταν μέλλωσιν ἀποθανεῖσθαι. φημί γάρ, ὧ ἄνδρες οἱ ἐμὲ ἀπεκτόνατε, τιμωρίαν ὑμῖν ἥξειν εὐθύς μετὰ τὸν ἐμὸν θάνατον πολὺ χαλεπωτέραν νῆ Δία ἢ οἶαν ἐμὲ ἀπεκτόνατε·

‘And now I wish to prophesy to you, O ye who have condemned me; for I am now at the time when men most do prophesy, the time just before death. And I say to you, ye men who have slain me, that punishment will come upon you straightway after my death, far more grievous in sooth than the punishment of death which you have meted out to me.’⁸²

It is the closeness of death that authorises humans themselves to speak prophecies. However, in contrast to the enigmatic mode in which the gods frequently prophesise, Socrates does not hesitate to speak straight to all those willing to listen. While he warns those who have found him guilty as charged that they, in turn, will receive punishment for condemning him to death, his voice remains human, not divine.

⁸⁰ Cf. the summary statement in Pl. *Ap.* 33C.

⁸¹ Pl. *Ap.* 31D.

⁸² Pl. *Ap.* 39C.

Conclusion

Overall, then, Plato's Socrates sets out to present himself in line with divinity, his form of teaching a service to the gods. At the core of this line of reasoning, however, is a rather clever move in the course of which accusations of *hybris* subtly change sides. First it is the philosopher himself who is accused of not acknowledging the gods of the city and of introducing new divinities. Yet in the course of his appearance at court, we find Socrates himself accusing those who seek to prevent him from practising philosophy of acting against divine will.⁸³

By invoking the authoritative voice of the oracle as part of his own defence, Plato's Socrates ultimately puts his audience into a somewhat uncomfortable position: either they acknowledge the truthfulness of the oracle and follow him in investigating its real meaning, or they commit themselves to slippery religious ground by challenging the authority of oracular Apollo.⁸⁴

Conclusion

Classical scholars have speculated extensively about what may have instigated Athens, a democratic city renowned for love of open debate, to execute one of its most famous citizens. Interpretations of the case tend to point towards an explanation that attributes Socrates' trial and ultimate execution to increased internal sensitivities springing from the fact that, in the years preceding the trial, Athens had lost a war against Sparta and her allies had suffered from a great plague that killed perhaps half her citizens, and experienced the repercussions of two oligarchic revolutions.⁸⁵ The recently restored democracy, so the argument goes, felt threatened by members of its citizen body who were widely perceived to have a subversive influence

⁸³ Socrates is keen to point out that he was commanded to interrogate people by the god at Delphi. To prevent him from doing so, then, is to go against the explicit will of the divine. Interestingly such mutual accusations of religious wrongdoing also feature in other Greek sources, for example in the Hippocratic treatise *The Sacred Disease* (see e.g. 3.1–3, 3.16–20).

⁸⁴ Hence he says at Pl. *Ap.* 29D: 'Men of Athens, I respect and love you, and while I live and am able to continue, I shall never give up philosophy.'

⁸⁵ This position is described in detail in Cartledge 2009: 76–90 (with further literature).

on the community, members it would have otherwise been able to tolerate.⁸⁶

The predominant reading of the trial is therefore political. It treats as ultimately political in nature the charges brought against Socrates.⁸⁷ In this reading of the trial, the religious dimension serves if not as a pretext so at least as symptomatic of the deeper challenges Socrates' teaching posed to Athenian identity and the internal integrity of its citizen body. In this version of events, Socrates was punished for having taught Alcibiades, Critias and other young men directly involved in the oligarchic revolutions.⁸⁸

More recently, a number of scholars have suggested that we take the religious dimension of the trial more seriously.⁸⁹ Mark McPherran has made a convincing case for the possibility of a religious reading of the trial.⁹⁰ This chapter has followed this line of reasoning and shown that the religious dimension of the trial becomes tangible in Socrates' response to his accusers. I have done so by moving a dimension of the *Apology* – the way in which Plato's Socrates tells a Delphic oracle story as part of his defence at court – to the core of the interpretation of the text.

A particular focus was on how broadly Socrates' engagement with the Delphic prophecy, as represented in this particular text and the real-life context it refers to, resonates with other oracle stories told elsewhere in Greek thought and literature – by alluding to similar themes, following the same narrative patterns, deviating from or even inverting these themes and patterns. Through the approximation of the oracular discourse throughout his court appearance, Plato's Socrates

⁸⁶ Socrates was not the only intellectual who was formally charged with a *graphē asebeias*. On Socrates' trial in the context of other similar trials at Athens see e.g. McPherran 1996: 131–3; Cartledge 2009: 83–90.

⁸⁷ See again Cartledge 2009 in detail.

⁸⁸ Cartledge 2009: 88.

⁸⁹ Most notably McPherran 1996 has offered a compelling religious reading of the trial. See also Cartledge 2009, even though he perhaps (over-)emphasises the point that at Athens religion itself was an extension of the political.

⁹⁰ McPherran 1996: 83–246.

Conclusion

appeals to a well-established pattern of religious storytelling to clear himself of charges of *asebeia*. From this perspective at least, the way in which Socrates relates his method of philosophical investigation to the supernatural presents a conscious yet ultimately unsuccessful attempt by the philosopher to explain his personal religiosity in terms familiar to the Athenians.

Despite all efforts of Plato's Socrates to dress up his personal religious outlook in familiar terms, he was unable to convince the majority of his fellow citizens of his innocence. Ultimately Socrates' attempts to present his way of practising philosophy as a religious service not just to the gods but to the city and its inhabitants were unsuccessful. We can only speculate why this was the case. Of course we do not know what was really spoken at court in 399 BCE, but if Plato's account of Socrates' defence is anything to go by, we may wonder what kind of impact his performance had on his audience. Perhaps the Athenians saw his elaborations, Delphic and otherwise, as just another attempt of the philosopher to 'make the weaker argument the stronger'? Perhaps they just didn't 'buy' the oracle story he told? Perhaps they even took his references to Delphi as just another attempt by a human being to manipulate the oracular for his own purposes?

However that may be, there is some evidence to suggest that the kind of lessons Plato's Socrates sought to teach the Athenians with the help of the oracular discourse remained relevant beyond his own case. Once upon a time, Dio Chrysostom tells us in his thirty-second discourse, in a speech addressed to the citizens of Alexandria, the Athenians were advised by the oracle that if they wanted good citizens they should put the best thing (*to kalliston*) into their boys' ears.⁹¹ Not understanding the meaning of the oracle, the Athenians resorted to golden things (earrings). Yet, as Dio Chrysostom is quick to point out, the 'finest things' in the eyes of the god were not of material value. The god had meant education (*paideia*) and

⁹¹ D. Chr. 32.3 with Fontenrose 1978: 331 (Q194).

reason (*logos*), ‘for it is natural that those who get these blessings should prove to be good men and saviours of the state’.⁹² If only the Athenians had listened better to the kind of story Plato’s Socrates presented to them in court.

⁹² D. Chr. 32.3 (transl. Cohoon and Crosby 1940).

CHAPTER 5

PAUSANIAS

What's the Stuff of Divinity?

Introduction

So far we have focused mainly on the features of oracle stories told in Classical times. In particular we considered how the oracular discourse evolved throughout the different genres of Greek thought and literature. We found that oracle stories, no matter whether told in historiography, Greek tragedy or, indeed, philosophy, feature similar themes and story patterns illustrating a number of recurrent views about the nature of the gods and their availability to human knowledge. In all instances we found that these stories – albeit in different ways – negotiate historical, literary and philosophico-religious dimensions. We will return to this point in the conclusion to this book where we consider the ‘poetics’ of the oracular discourse in more detail.

The next two chapters focus on two later tellings of oracle stories in the literature of Roman Greece. They not only highlight the astonishing continuity of oracle stories over time but also complicate the picture in that they illustrate an aspect of Delphic oracle stories which has so far not featured prominently in this study: the way in which these stories also draw on other representations of divinity. Both chapters consider Delphic oracle stories, which feature statues in addition to oracular utterances; both chapters investigate the interplay between oracles and statues as different forms of divine representation.

Chapter 5 explores material representations of divinity by focusing on the circulation of objects in ancient Greek culture more generally. It enquires into how religious storytelling draws on the principles and practices of how the materiality of

objects was conceived in ancient Greece and explores how the oracular interferes with this materiality.

Objects and Identities

When he was a young boy of just nine years of age, Theagenes of Thasos, on his way back from school, happened to walk past a divine statue cast in bronze, on display in the agora.¹ Because he liked it, he shouldered it and carried it home. At first, the people of Thasos were not impressed by this remarkable display of physical strength. Had it not been for the intervention of a well-respected elder citizen they would have put the boy to death for this sacrilegious act. Instead Theagenes was told to return the statue to its original location, which he did, again showing off a degree of physical strength and endurance, extraordinary for an adult, not to mention a child. And this time the boy's achievement did not go unnoticed. Pausanias, who records this story in the sixth book of his *Periegesis*, adds that the boy's extraordinary vigour became the subject of urban legend and ἀνὰ πᾶσαν ἐβεβόητο τὴν Ἑλλάδα, 'was gossiped about all over Greece'.²

This charming incident is by no means as innocent as it may seem at first glance. To start with, it illustrates an aspect of the 'human condition' which social anthropologists and philosophers alike have studied for some time: the link between our individuality and certain things in our physical environment.³ The story from Thasos confirms that in ancient Greece, as elsewhere, inanimate objects are intricately involved in the establishment of human identity.

There is an abundant array of ancient Greek tales illustrating this link between objects and identities. In the story of Cleobis and Biton, as told by Herodotus, the two young men parade not just their outstanding strength but also their

¹ Paus. 6.11.2–9. In inscriptions Theagenes is referred to as Theuogenes and Theogenes (see *RE* II, 6.1, 252 and Pouilloux 1994 with further evidence).

² Paus. 6.11.3. Throughout this chapter I have used the translation by Jones 1933. I have made changes where necessary.

³ E.g. Arendt 1998: 139–44; Brown 2010. On ethnographic objects in the establishment of cultural identity: Stocking 1985.

extraordinary filial piety by pulling a heavy cart carrying their mother all the way to the temple of Hera at Argos.⁴ Or we may think of Pulydamas who, according to Pausanias, is said to have single-handedly stopped a speeding chariot by holding on to it.⁵

Within the framework of Theagenes' story, the materiality of the statue – its heavy bronze corporality – allows the boy to showcase his extraordinary physique and, in doing so, to give an early indication of his 'essence' – a potential (a promise) that he will realise later in life. For Theagenes goes on to show off his astonishing abilities: as a famous athlete, he wins a ridiculous number of wreaths in various athletic competitions throughout the Greek world – Pausanias counts 1400, Plutarch 1200, a Delphic inscription has 1300 in boxing, the pancratium and running.⁶ In short, Theagenes' display of his youthful vigour is just one (perhaps *the* very first) manifestation of things to come.

It should come as no surprise that it is a statue that helps the boy to put his prowess on show. Scholars of art history and literary criticism alike have variously demonstrated that statues – in particular if they resemble the human body (anthropomorphic statues) – serve as a preferred class of objects in the negotiation of human identities vis-à-vis inanimate objects.⁷ Kenneth Gross in particular has directed our attention to the ways in which statues, especially of the animated type, feature in the literary and artistic imagination from antiquity to the present.⁸

Ultimately, however, the 'cultural energy' of statues cannot be retrieved through a largely a-historic form of criticism (as proposed by Gross and others) that almost seamlessly

⁴ Hdt. 1.31. In the case of Cleobis and Biton, the intimate link between objects and identities is further confirmed when the young men's excellence later manifests physically in the form of two statues which the Argives erect in their honour at Delphi. See also Ath. 10.412D for another demonstration of Theagenes' outstanding physical abilities: he is said to have eaten an entire bull.

⁵ Paus. 6.5.6.

⁶ Paus 6.11.5; Plu. *Moralia* 811E.

⁷ The *locus classicus* here remains Gell 1998.

⁸ Gross 1992.

compares themes in statuary representations throughout the ages and in different cultures and literatures.⁹ The distinct forms taken by the 'handling' or, more generally, the circulation of statues, both real and imaginary, in a particular place and at a particular time, are historically and culturally specific. They are part of what Bill Brown has recently referred to in another context as 'object culture'.

By *object culture* I mean to designate the objects through which a culture constitutes itself, which is to say, too, culture as it is objectified in material forms. A given object culture entails the practical and symbolic use of objects. It thus entails both the ways that inanimate objects mediate human relations and the ways that humans mediate object relations (generating differences of value, significance, and permanence among them), thus the systems (material, economic, symbolic) through which objects become meaningful or fail to.¹⁰

That is to say that even though the idea of the moving statue, or of the weeping statue, or of the bleeding statue may indeed feature in different societies both past and present, the specific forms and symbolic meaning of this idea at a particular place and a particular time are culturally and historically specific. Deborah Tarn Steiner and other classical scholars have shown that there is indeed something specifically Greek and Roman about the way in which statues were commissioned, presented, manhandled, worshipped, moved about, dressed, assaulted, traded, decorated and destroyed – to mention just a few things that people in the ancient world 'did' to their statues.¹¹

I use the story of Theagenes as a starting point to sketch the triangular relationship among narrative, object culture and ancient Greek thought about the nature of the divine. In particular, I aim to highlight two aspects of how this story and similar stories work. First, I show that aetiological stories and Greek speculation about the divine more generally draw on the principles and practices of Greek object culture in order to bring out certain aspects of the human condition vis-à-vis the inanimate

⁹ See e.g. Donohue's review of Gross (Donohue 2004).

¹⁰ Brown 2010: 188.

¹¹ Steiner 2001. See also Donohue 1988; Faraone 1992; Scheer 2000; Graf 2001; Stewart 2003; Vout 2007: 52–135; Johnston 2008a; Bremmer 2013.

and material, which – and this is key – served as a placeholder for humanity and divinity alike. Second, I illustrate that the status of these stories qua stories is indeed central to the kinds of questions these tales typically raise. However, before we can understand how religious thought comes into the picture here we will need to follow Theagenes' story a bit further.

Gods, Men and Objects

The astonishing encounter between the boy and the divine image is not the only feat involving Theagenes and statues. The child who once carried off the heavy bronze sculpture is himself later in life variously represented in bronze form.¹² Due to his extraordinary athletic success, so-called victor statues of Theagenes were erected in various locations throughout the Greek world, including in such prominent places as Delphi, Olympia and, of course, on Thasos itself.¹³ Unfortunately the portrait statues themselves have not come down to us, but some bases featuring inscriptions listing his victories have endured.¹⁴

Pausanias tells us that the statue on Thasos apparently received some unwanted attention after the death of Theagenes.¹⁵ Someone who hated the athlete during his lifetime approached the statue every night and flogged it ἄτε αὐτῷ Θεαγένει λυμαίνόμενος, 'as if he were beating up Theagenes himself'.¹⁶ But it did not take long for the perpetrator to suffer the consequences of his assault: the statue fell over and killed him. His sons, however, took the statue to court, prosecuted it for murder and obtained a guilty verdict. According to the laws of Draco, which stated that objects that cause the death of a person should be removed from the community, the statue was cast into the sea.

¹² See e.g. Ath. 10.412D/E featuring a bronze statue of Theagenes with his hand stretched out demanding more food even though he had just consumed an entire bull in one sitting. The statue (and the story that goes with it) again illustrates the various symbolic relationships between objects (food and statues) and human identities.

¹³ On the role of victor statues in the process of heroisation see Currie 2005: 143–8.

¹⁴ See e.g. *IG* 12.8, 278 C31 (Thasos).

¹⁵ Paus. 6.11.6–9.

¹⁶ Paus. 6.11.6.

This was not the end of it. Subsequently the land on Thasos became barren, whereupon the Thasians petitioned the Delphic oracle for help. When the oracle advised them καταδέχεσθαι τοὺς δεδιωγμένους, 'to take back the exiles', they variously invited people that had once been banished back into the community – alas without success.¹⁷ A second delegation was dispatched to Delphi. The Pythia's response to their complaint – Θεαγένην δ' ἄμνηστον ἀφήκατε τὸν μέγαν ὑμέων, 'you have left your great Theagenes unremembered' – at first caused considerable concern as there seemed to be no way the statue could be retrieved from the depths of the sea.¹⁸ When some fishermen happened to catch it in their nets, Theagenes' image was returned to its original location and re-dedicated. The statue also came to receive divine honours. Pausanias concludes this illustrious charade of animate and inanimate bodies with an observation of his own: πολλαχοῦ δὲ καὶ ἐτέρωθι ἔν τε Ἑλλήσιν οἶδα καὶ παρὰ βαρβάροις ἀγάλματα ἰδρυμένα Θεαγένους καὶ νοσήματά τε αὐτὸν ἰώμενον καὶ ἔχοντα παρὰ τῶν ἐπιχωρίων τιμᾶς. ὁ δὲ ἀνδριάς τοῦ Θεαγένους ἐστὶν ἐν τῇ Ἄλτει, τέχνη τοῦ Αἰγινήτου Γλαυκίου, 'And I know of statues of Theagenes erected in many other places by Greeks and by barbarians, where he cures diseases and receives local worship. The statue of Theagenes is in the Altis, being the work of Glaucias of Aegina.'¹⁹

What is at stake in this peculiar succession of events? What kind of questions are paraded and dramatised here? To the modern reader, at least, arguably the most surprising turn – in a whole series of unexpected twists in Pausanias' account – may well be the statue's subjection to legal action. The idea that inanimate objects could be tried for homicide seems strange to us today: it conflicts with our notions of the intricate link between intentionality and accountability.²⁰ In our

¹⁷ Paus. 6.11.7.

¹⁸ Paus. 6.11.8.

¹⁹ Paus. 6.11.9.

²⁰ Apparently the prosecution of animals was still a possibility in Western Europe during the medieval and early modern periods: see Dox 1931; Fischer 2005; Sickert 2013.

object culture, the question of accountability no longer applies in any legally meaningful way to what we may want to call – to misappropriate a term from Michel Foucault – ‘the order of things’, that is, the rules and conventions governing the circulation of material objects in a particular culture and society.²¹ Given that the story also features the astonishing fall of a statue onto its assailant and other elements bordering on the fantastic, perhaps we should simply note the incidents on Thasos as a series of charming but ultimately trivial topoi of literary fiction making? And, indeed, classical scholarship has considered this story mainly in the context of literary motif and its relationship to the real-life process of heroisation, but not as a carrier of religious views.²²

To dismiss this episode as merely storytelling, however, would be to cut ourselves off from a much deeper understanding of ancient Greek object culture – and of Greek religious discourse as it draws on and participates in this object culture. There is ample evidence to suggest that in Classical Greece the idea to prosecute a statue for murder would not have seemed strange – if perhaps a bit old-fashioned. Draco’s laws indeed specified that at Athens both inanimate objects and animals involved in involuntary homicide should be tried in a special court, the Prytaneum.²³ We know that several cities adopted the same laws and that in some communities, including apparently on Thasos, these laws remained in place far into the Classical period – the time in which Pausanias’ account is set.²⁴

No cases recording legal action against animals involved in homicide have come down to us but we do know of a few instances in which objects were indeed held accountable for

²¹ I am referring here, of course, to the English translation of Foucault’s famous work *Les Mots et les choses: une archéologie des sciences humaines* (1966): *The Order of Things*. Foucault’s ‘order of things’ refers to the epistemologies of science (and other discourses). I here use the same term as a shortcut to refer to the physical laws applying to material objects.

²² See in particular Fontenrose 1968; Currie 2005.

²³ See D. 23.76, Poll. 8.120, 8.90. See also Arist. *Ath.* 57.4. Aeschin. 3.244. On the Prytaneum see also MacDowell 1978, 117–18. See also the only extensive discussion of the possibility to prosecute lifeless things in Katz 1931, now outdated, as its explanation relies on notions of primitive animism.

²⁴ Isoc. 4.40.

the shedding of blood. There is, for example, the case of a young boy who once played underneath the famous statue of the Corcyrean bronze bull in the Altis at Olympia.²⁵ When the boy suddenly lifted his head, he smashed it against the heavy bronze, and died a few days later. The Eleans proposed to remove the offending item from the sanctuary of Zeus. However, as in the story about Theagenes' statue, the Delphic oracle clarifies the matter: the statue is to stay in situ but should be ritually cleansed from the stain of unintentional homicide in the customary way. The twist in this particular story is that, apparently, no agency by the statue was necessary for it to be held responsible for the loss of life.

The so-called Bouphonia ('Ox-killing') provides the central ritual of the Athenian festival of the Dipolieia. The aetiology of the ritual complicates the notion of objects as agents. It illustrates that at least in the realm of aetiology, liability for the shedding of blood could be passed from a human agent to a material object.²⁶ Porphyry, who gives us the most detailed version of the story, tells us that the killing of the very first (farm) oxen at Athens is re-staged annually in ritualistic form and subsequently heard in a mock trial in which the defence evolved as follows:

ὦν δὴ αἱ μὲν ὕδροφόροι τοὺς ἀκονήσαντας αὐτῶν ἡτιῶντο μᾶλλον, οἱ δὲ ἀκονήσαντες τὸν ἐπιδόντα τὸν πέλεκυν, οὗτος δὲ τὸν ἐπισφάξαντα, καὶ ὁ τοῦτο δράσας τὴν μάχαιραν, καθ' ἧς οὕσης ἀφώνου τὸν φόνον κατέγνωσαν. ἀπὸ δ' ἐκείνου μέχρι τοῦ νῦν αἰεὶ τοῖς Διιπολείοις Ἀθηνησιν ἐν ἀκροπόλει οἱ εἰρημένοι τὸν αὐτὸν τρόπον ποιοῦνται τὴν τοῦ βοῦς θυσίαν.

The water-bearers blamed the whetters rather than themselves, and the whetters the man who handed over the axe, and this man the one who then cut its throat, and the one who did this blamed the knife, and the knife, being speechless, they condemned for the killing. Ever since until the present at the Dipolieia on the acropolis in Athens the persons mentioned have performed the sacrifice of the ox in the same way.²⁷

²⁵ Paus. 5.27.10.

²⁶ On the Dipolieia see e.g. Deubner 1932: 158–74; Burkert 1983: 136–43; Bremmer 1994: 41–3; Parker 2005: 187–91. See also Henrichs 1992: 153–5 with further literature.

²⁷ Porph. *Abst.* 2.30.

According to this aetiology, the blood guilt for the very first shedding of oxen blood and for its annual repetition in ritual is passed on quite literally from one human agent to the next until, like Theagenes' image, it is cast into the water and comes to rest, in reified form, at the bottom of the sea.²⁸

The idea behind the liability of material objects as a peculiar aspect of Greek object culture is, of course, that the shedding of blood, no matter whether voluntary or by accident, brings with it blood guilt and pollution.²⁹ This stain attaches itself to the agent of death, be it human, animal or material object, or animal as material object as in the case of the Corcyrean bull. If not dealt with instantly and properly, this blood guilt will bring divine retribution in the form of various calamities on the agent of death and the entire city as a moral community.³⁰

The link between blood guilt and the many afflictions to befall a city (usually summarised as *loimos*) is variously developed and explored throughout Greek thought and literature.³¹ It features prominently, for example, in the beginning of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, when King Oedipus is ignorant about the seriousness of the blood guilt he has incurred.³²

The concept of pollution and blood guilt is also what motivates the prosecution of Theagenes' statue, its conviction and subsequent removal from Thasos. This story illustrates the fact that in ancient Greek object culture, the notion of causation could be applied to physical objects in a very literal and physical sense in order to avoid negative consequences for the moral

²⁸ Porphyry explicitly tells us here that the knife was subsequently thrown into the sea. The same idea of the separability of the physical agent from the human agent who executed it is also at work in the Athenian custom of burying the hand of someone who has committed suicide separately from the body it has struck. See Aeschin. 3.244 (*Against Ctesiphon*).

²⁹ Parker 1983: 111–18.

³⁰ The various scenarios in which this rule does and does not apply are discussed in detail in Parker 1983: 104–43. The possibility of an entire city suffering from the consequences of the blood guilt of one of its inhabitants is also evoked by the prosecution in the case discussed in Antiphon's *Second Tetralogy* (1.2) in which a boy has died from accidentally running into the way of a javelin thrown by another boy in the gymnasium.

³¹ See Parker 1983: 257–80.

³² S. OT 1–353.

community in which bloodshed had occurred. In highlighting the consequences of the statue's fall on its assailant and its subsequent removal from Thasos, Pausanias' story confirms that ancient Greek object culture constructed the divide between subject and object along different, more fluid and permeable lines.

What makes this story stand out, then, is not so much that the statue is prosecuted for murder, but that its removal from Thasos does not bring about the desired effect. Indeed, our story complicates the usual story pattern of homicide, blood guilt and purification through exile in so far as pollution and its negative consequences for the city are not *avoided* but actually *incurred* by the removal of the statue. The barrenness of the land immediately indicates that all is not well at Thasos. In a nutshell, rather than appeasing the anger of the gods, the Thasians actually seem to have evoked it. There seems to be more at stake for the Thasians in their dealings with the statue than what is apparent at first sight.

The Significant and the Insignificant

Before we explain this aspect of the story, we will first delve more deeply into the way in which divine agency comes into the picture here. For Theagenes' story reverberates not only with narratives featuring the *loimos* motif as a form of divine punishment or intervention, it also relates to a whole set of other tales featuring marvellous occurrences pertaining to statues, in particular victor statues (statues of victors in games).³³ In his treatise *On Marvellous Things Heard*, Ps.-Aristotle reports the case of the statue of another athlete, Bitys from Argos, which – just like Theagenes' image – fell upon the murderer of the athlete and killed him. Ps.-Aristotle comments rather laconically on the significance of this incident: 'One would suppose that this kind of thing does not happen at random (ἔοικεν οὖν οὐκ εἰκῇ τὰ τοιαῦτα γίνεσθαι).'³⁴ The unexpected

³³ *Loimos*: Parker 1983: 271–5 (with further references).

³⁴ Ps.-Arist. *Mir.* 156 (= 846a22–4 Bekker).

and unlikely, judged here as counter to the norms and conventions governing what I have referred to above as ‘the order of things’ – a statue’s unlikely fall on the murderer of the human being it represents – is taken by Ps.-Aristotle to indicate a deeper significance, even though he does not go further to explain this significance.

More frequently than not, this significance is found in the sphere of the supernatural. Take for example an incident which, according to the author who tells it, constituted something of an ‘unprecedented marvel’ (*nihil aliud miratum*). Referring to Callimachus, Pliny reports that once two statues of the famous boxer Euthymus, an adversary of Theagenes, were struck by lightning on the very same day.³⁵ Again it is a highly unlikely occurrence – a deviation from the rules and conventions governing not only the order of things but the order of nature more generally – at the heart of this story and one which is suggestive of a deeper meaning. As in the story of Theagenes, the oracle helps to clarify what kind of force was at work behind the marvellous dual bolts from heaven.³⁶ The oracle advises that sacrifices should be made in his honour, effectively recommending the institutionalisation of a hero cult.

A number of Delphic oracle stories similarly attest to the fact that the oracle apparently advised humans in matters of cult foundation.³⁷ The instigation of a hero cult is a well-known topos of oracular consultation as represented in a number of sources.³⁸ To attain a hero cult within one’s lifetime was unusual even for an outstanding athlete like Euthymus. Pliny concludes the entire episode by repeating the earlier acknowledgement of the marvellous at work: *nihilque de eo mirum aliud quam hoc placuisse dis*, ‘nothing about it is surprising except that the gods so decreed’.³⁹

³⁵ Pliny *NH* 7.152.

³⁶ See also the concession of the prosecution in the case heard in the *Second Tetralogy* that the exercising boy’s bad luck in killing the other boy may itself be a form of divine punishment for an offence committed in the past. Antiphon, *Second Tetralogy* 3.10.

³⁷ See the oracles pertaining to ‘cult foundations’ listed in Fontenrose 1978: 11–57 (in particular 27, 29, 48, 50).

³⁸ See e.g. Dem. 43.66; X. *Lac.* 8.5; Paus. 1.32.5, 6.9.8; Plut. *Arist.* 11.3.

³⁹ Pliny *NH* 7.152.

Object culture, it follows, did not just provide a means or a medium for the establishment of human identities, as I have shown above, or for the expression of symbolic relationships between them (e.g. in the form of victor statues at Olympia and elsewhere). In the context of the ancient world, the order of things also served as a prime location for the materialisation of divinity and more generally the manifestation of the supernatural in the human sphere. Material objects served as a location for the manifestation of both human *and* divine essence – an obvious potential for both human–divine encounters and a source for potential misunderstanding.

It may be worth remembering that this role of the material is not just the stuff of literary fiction making and storytelling, aetiological or otherwise. Some parts of the Greco-Roman system of divination relied on the very same ‘semantics’ of the ordinary and the extraordinary, the natural and the supernatural. In particular, many forms of technical divination drew on natural signs which become tangible in the patterns and cycles of the physical and natural environment, including obvious deviations from these patterns.⁴⁰ It is in this sense, then, that aetiologies indeed re-enact an explanatory pattern that could be found in Greek culture and society more widely.

Statues provided a preferred class of objects: not only did they represent outstanding human achievement – as for example in the case of Theagenes, the athlete – but they also served as a preferred way of representing the gods and as focal points of worship and human contact with the divine – as in the case of Theagenes’ statue, which received superhuman healing powers. The human condition is indeed doubly defined: vis-à-vis both the order of things and the divine cosmos as it draws on the order of things to reveal itself.

The rules and physical laws pertaining to the order of things and to the order of nature more generally help distinguish the ordinary from the extraordinary and the significant from the insignificant. In particular, obvious deviations from the ordinary are taken as an indication of divine manifestation and

⁴⁰ See e.g. Flower 2008: 104–14; Johnston 2008b: 125–41; Raphals 2013: 149–63.

presence. Ancient Greek religion drew upon this aspect of Greek object culture with the ultimate goal of recognising the marvellous ways in which the supernatural manifests itself in the human sphere. The physical world (like the realm of nature more generally) provided a canvas for the materialisation of divine essence, and deviations from the order of things served as prime indications for the divine cosmos.

Pausanias' story of Theagenes offers an excellent example of this link by revolving around a statue which refuses to commit itself fully to its membership in the order of things. Even in its material form Theagenes' physique does not remain fully grounded in the realm of the inanimate. Serving as a placeholder for Theagenes' physical body after his death, the statue literally shakes off its passive role as an object of physical abuse. It falls over and kills the culprit, again crossing into the realm of the animate. The statue maintains its ambiguous position (between subject and object, between animate and inanimate) towards the end of Pausanias' account. It miraculously offers itself as the catch of the day and, perhaps more significantly, now firmly grounded in place at the heart of the ancient Greek city, Theagenes' image at Thasos is attributed healing powers.

The ambiguous (animate/inanimate) position of Theagenes' bronze image, however, supports a more fundamental ambiguity of the statue as a representation of both human and divine 'essence'. For just as the story features the reification of human physical success in material form, it also parades the manifestation of the divine and its materialisation in the human sphere through statues, oracles and omens. After all, this is a story about the transformation of a statue of an extraordinary athlete into a statue of a semi-divine hero with healing powers over the human body.

In some sense, the incidents at Thasos are driven by an increasingly overt sense of divine presence and intervention. Clearly there is a strong sense of divine order towards the end of Pausanias' account, when the oracle demands the celebration of Theagenes' achievements, hence preparing – and explaining – his transformation into a hero and that of his statue into an object of cult veneration possessed of ritual powers.

Other hints of divinity and divine intervention are more subtle and indirect: there is the obscure and misinterpreted oracle demanding the return of exiles, and the ominous failure of crops at Thasos, a threat to the existence of the entire community, which we know from many other contexts indicates strong divine disapproval.⁴¹

However, disapproval of what? In the sequence of Pausanias' narrative, the fact that crop failure directly follows the 'exile' of the statue seems to indicate that the gods disapprove of the statue's removal from its original location. This explanation is subsequently confirmed within the story by the explicit oracular demand for the statue's return and its final re-dedication in exactly the same spot.

Narrative, Time and Causation

Narrative is indeed central to how this story works. Pausanias' account offers us a chain of events linked up in a narrative structure in which one 'whereupon' follows another. The temporal conjunction, however, does much more than merely help the story along. It is used to imply a relationship between the events related to us in terms of cause and effect: 'whereupon' becomes (or implies) 'because'.

In *Poetics*, Aristotle explicitly comments upon the significance of this aspect of Greek object culture for the poetic art. In a passage concerned with the construction of tragic plot, he distinguishes different ways of connecting events into a story. Plots that depict a series of unconnected events are of inferior quality in that they are intrinsically unable to evoke the audience's imagination. He states that 'of simple plots and actions, the episodic are worst. By "episodic" I mean a plot in which the episodes follow one another without probability or necessity'.⁴²

In contrast the best way to construct a varied plot is to depict a series of unlikely events which are *contrary to expectation* but

⁴¹ Crop failure as a divine sign: see Parker 1983: 271–5 (with further examples).

⁴² Arist. *Po.* 9.1451B, 32–5.

turn out to be *causally connected*. Aristotle invokes the same old story of the falling statue to make his point:

τὸ γὰρ θαυμαστὸν οὕτως ἔξει μᾶλλον ἢ εἰ ἀπὸ τοῦ αὐτομάτου καὶ τῆς τύχης, ἐπεὶ καὶ τῶν ἀπὸ τύχης ταῦτα θαυμασιώτατα δοκεῖ ὅσα ὥσπερ ἐπίτηδες φαίνεται γεγονέναι, οἷον ὡς ὁ ἀνδριάς ὁ τοῦ Μίτυος ἐν Ἀργεὶ ἀπέκτεινεν τὸν αἴτιον τοῦ θανάτου τῷ Μίτυι, θεωροῦντι ἐμπεσῶν· ἔοικε γὰρ τὰ τοιαῦτα οὐκ εἰκῇ γίνεσθαι· ὥστε ἀνάγκη τοὺς τοιούτους εἶναι καλλίους μύθους.

The awesome will be maintained in this way more than through show of chance and fortune, because even among chance events we find most awesome those which seem to have happened by design (as when Mitys' statue at Argos killed the murderer of Mitys by falling on him as he looked at it; such things seem not to occur randomly). And so, such plots are bound to be finer.⁴³

A good storyline, it follows – and Aristotle's comments, in some sense, certainly exceed the narrow context of tragedy to apply to storytelling more generally – distinguishes itself not just by the kind of events it depicts, but also and in particular in the relationships among them.

In the example Aristotle chooses 'the order of things' again serves as a matrix of norms and conventions from which the moving statue diverges by falling on its assailant, suggesting a deeper (supernatural?) presence without ever spelling out its precise nature. A good storyline is able to convey a sense of wonder (θαῦμα) as something both prior to and inherent in all human efforts to make sense, in particular if this sense-making is concerned with explaining some of the marvellous ways in which the supernatural reveals itself. Again the question of causation and the semantics of the ordinary and the extraordinary, the significant and the insignificant, are key.

A number of aetiological oracle stories feature the sometimes problematic fusion of 'whereupon' and 'because', of temporal succession and causal explanation of events. A good example comes from book 9 of Herodotus' *Histories* in a story already mentioned in [chapter 2](#). Herodotus uses this story to explain why a certain Euenius of Apollo-town (Apollonia) received the gift of divination.⁴⁴ Euenius looks after a flock

⁴³ Arist. *Po* 9.1452A.

⁴⁴ Hdt. 9.93–4.

of sheep sacred to the sun. One day, however, he falls asleep *whereupon* wolves kill about sixty sheep; *whereupon* Euenius replaces the sheep; *whereupon* the Apollonians find out what happened and blind Euenius as a form of punishment; *whereupon* Apollo-town is struck by *loimos*; *whereupon* – you guessed it – the Delphic oracle is consulted for advice. In what turns out to be a remarkable reversal of the chain of causation driving the storyline so far, the oracle reveals that the wolves were actually sent by the gods and that Euenius not only would receive the gift of divination – a much deeper vision than the one he lost – but should also be compensated by whatever he wishes to choose from the Apollonians.⁴⁵

Herodotus' story does not break off here. Indeed, the second part of the narrative gives an equally gripping and intriguing account of human cunning and deceit: the people of Apollonia do not reveal the oracle as the source of motivation for their offer of compensation to Euenius. Yet the rest of the story does not concern us here. For what has already become clear is that, in this example, as in the story of Theagenes, there is a strong link between narrative sequence and causation. Indeed, the oracle's revelation of the gods as the agents behind the true reason the sheep died (and, presumably, Euenius fell asleep in the first place) directly focuses our attention on this aspect of the story.

To return one last time to Theagenes and his multiple entanglement with statues: some of the causal conjunctions between events related in this particular sequence of events are straightforward: *because* Theagenes was a successful athlete he received a number of victor statues; *because* someone had hated him during his lifetime one of these statues was assaulted at night, and so forth.

Other causal conjunctions are less developed, less obvious and more tentative. Should we assume that the gods also endorsed the statue's fall upon its assailant as an act of righteous retribution? Is this perhaps a form of divine intervention? Or just a freak accident? A kinetic result of the statue's

⁴⁵ On this story see in particular Griffiths 1999 and Burkert 2007.

Conclusion

whipping? The story seems to suggest that it is Theagenes himself who – through his bronze body – is taking revenge, but it offers no final sense of closure with regard to the exact nature and events of divine intervention at work.

In particular we are left to wonder how early we should assume divinity at work in Theagenes' life. Does he become a hero *because* of his outstanding success as an athlete? Or should we rather assume that his extraordinary physical strength was itself an early indication of his divine 'essence'? Did the young boy's attraction to the divine statue bring out not just his physical potential as a future athlete but also his potential as a future hero with supernatural powers? Ultimately there is no clear-cut answer. The story of Theagenes is an aetiological story explaining his posthumous veneration in various locations in ancient Greece (most notably, perhaps, at Olympia where Pausanias encountered Theagenes' bronze image).⁴⁶ Yet it is an aetiological story based on a problematic conception of causation, which raises more questions about the nature of divinity than it is ultimately prepared to answer.

Conclusion

In this chapter I used the story of Theagenes' multiple entanglements with statues to illustrate the triangular relationship of narrative, Greek object culture and Greek 'theological' discourse about the nature of the gods. I showed that this particular aetiological story reverberates with a whole series of other stories with similar themes (such as moving statues, the *loimos* motif, revelatory oracles, etc.). Indeed the story of Theagenes appears to be part of a much broader Greek conversation about the surprising ways in which the divine manifests itself in the human sphere.

The conversation revolves around a set of complex questions about the nature of divinity and its availability to human

⁴⁶ On this story in the context of the heroisation of athletes in ancient Greece see Currie 2005: 120–57. For a comparative description of the story pattern of 'the hero as an athlete' see also Fontenrose 1968.

knowledge. By parading the problematic relationship between cause and effect, between the animate and the inanimate, between human and divine bodies, it highlights the issue of how we are to recognise divinity in its different manifestations and presentations in the human sphere. The question at the heart of Pausanias' oracle story, then, is as simple as it is 'theologically' provocative: what is the stuff of divinity? How can we know the gods? In the [next chapter](#) we encounter a provisional answer to this question.

CHAPTER 6

ATHENAEUS

Encountering the Divine in Word and Wood

Introduction

This chapter starts from a somewhat eccentric source: an excerpt from Semus' lost *History of Delos*, dating perhaps from the late third century BCE. It is preserved in Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistae*, a loosely conceived collection of learned tales and fragments of earlier authors dating from the third century CE. It tells a rather odd story of laughter – lost, then regained – which may leave the modern reader slightly puzzled (not just left out on the joke). After all, the story features the rather disturbing image of a human protagonist laughing about a divine representation and – as so often in Delphic oracle stories – what is at stake in the peculiar string of events is by no means immediately obvious.

By relating the series of incidents featured in the story to the 'surrounding world of significance', and by drawing various lines between the text and its cultural, historical and, indeed, cognitive context, the joke at the core of this story will become clear. More importantly, perhaps, Greek ways of thinking about the gods become intelligible, a 'theology' of ancient Greek religion that we already encountered in a different form in the [previous chapter](#). So, let us start at the beginning: with the story itself.

Parmeniscus' Journey

Παρμενίσκος δὲ ὁ Μεταποντίνος, ὥς φησιν Σῆμος ἐν ε' Δηλιάδος, καὶ γένει καὶ πλούτῳ πρωτεύων εἰς Τροφωνίου καταβάς καὶ ἀνελθὼν οὐκ ἔτι γελαῖν ἐδύνατο. καὶ χρηστηριοζομένη περὶ τούτου ἡ Πυθία ἔφη·

Athenaeus: Encountering the Divine in Word and Wood

εἶρη μ' ἄμφι γέλωτος, ἀμείλιχε, μελιχίοιο·

δώσει σοι μήτηρ οἴκοι· τὴν ἔσοχα τίε.

ἐλπίζων δ' ἂν ἐπανέλθῃ εἰς τὴν πατρίδα γελάσειν, ὥς οὐδὲν ἦν πλέον, οἰόμενος ἐξηπατῆσθαι ἔρχεται ποτε κατὰ τύχην εἰς Δῆλον· καὶ πάντα τὰ κατὰ τὴν νῆσον θαυμάζων ἦλθεν καὶ εἰς τὸ Λητώον, νομίζων τῆς Ἀπόλλωνος μητρὸς ἄγαλμά τι θεωρήσειν ἀξιόλογον· ἰδὼν δ' αὐτὸ ξύλον ὃν ἄμορφον παραδόξως ἐγέλασεν. καὶ τὸν τοῦ θεοῦ χρησμὸν συμβάλλων καὶ τῆς ἄρρωστίας ἀπαλλαγεῖς μεγαλωστί τὴν θεὸν ἐτίμησεν.

But Parmeniscus of Metapontum, as Semus states in book 5 of his *History of Delos*, a distinguished man by birth and wealth, was unable to laugh after he had descended into and returned from the oracle of Trophonius. And when he enquired at Delphi about this matter the Pythia replied:

‘You, implacable one, ask me about soothing laughter;

the mother will give it to you at home; honour her greatly.’

He expected that if he returned back home he would be able to laugh again. When events did not turn out according to plan, he believed that he had been deceived. By chance he once went to Delos. He marvelled at all the things the island had to offer and also entered the temple of Leto, assuming that the statue of Apollo’s mother would be something noteworthy to gaze at. But when he saw that it was just a misshapen piece of wood he unexpectedly burst into laughter. He understood the meaning of the oracle and, cured from his inability, he honoured the goddess extensively.¹

A critically inclined mind might, of course, observe that the story, as told by Athenaeus/Semus, shows suspicious signs of literary fashioning. Above all, Parmeniscus’ adventure follows the set pattern of human misinterpretation of divine language we have already encountered in the other chapters of this book. It also features the revelation of the meaning of oracular ambiguity in a not entirely unexpected twist, a topos that again features prominently within the oracular genre.² Is this perhaps just another aetiological story that explains a particular dedication, as Felix Jacoby and others have suggested?³ The inventory of the Letoon of the year 156/5 BCE mentions a bronze plaque dedicated by a certain Parmiscus, generally believed to be identical with the Parmeniscus of our story.⁴ Moreover, the historicity

¹ *FGrHist* 396 F10 = Ath. 14.614A–B (= Kaibel 14.2).

² See Fontenrose 1978: 58–87; Maurizio 1993; Bowden 2005: 49–51.

³ Jacoby in *RE* II.2 (1923): 1358. Fontenrose 1978: 328 classified this oracle story as not genuine. On these kinds of aetiological stories see also Steiner 2001: 82.

⁴ See *IDelos* 1417 A col. 1, 109–11. Bruneau 1970: 211, n. 3 and Romano 1980: 203 identify the Parmiscus of the bronze dedication with the Parmeniscus of our story.

of Parmeniscus is also confirmed by Diogenes Laertius, who describes him in passing as a Pythagorean philosopher.⁵

As I will illustrate in this chapter, the account relating Parmeniscus' multiple encounters with the divine has something interesting to say about Greek perceptions of the divine *because of* and not *despite* its narrative shaping. As Robert Darnton has pointed out in another context, historical storytelling, like all storytelling, 'sets the action in a frame of reference; it assumes a certain repertory of associations and responses on the part of its audience; and it provides meaningful shape to the raw stuff of experience'.⁶ I will argue that the way in which Parmeniscus' experience of the divine is framed and presented in the account of Semus/Athenaeus grants us an invaluable glimpse into Greek representations of divinity – in both word and wood – and into the modes of thinking associated with them.

Theōria and the Greek Religious Gaze

To begin our enquiry into the meaning of the story, let us start at the end when Parmeniscus gazes at the statue of the goddess Leto and, rather unexpectedly (*paradoxōs*), bursts into laughter. One way classical scholars explore the mental conceptions and modes of thought of the ancient world is through the paradigm of sight. As Hans Gerhard Kippenberg has stated in another context, seeing is always an act of information-processing and as such is partial, partisan and biased.⁷ *Ekphrasis*, 'the extended and detailed literary description of any object, real or imaginary', in particular, provides a direct insight into ancient ways of looking and into associated patterns of thought.⁸ Yet subtler, less detailed and openly descriptive references as to how the world takes shape in the

⁵ D.L. 9.20.

⁶ Darnton 1984: 78.

⁷ Kippenberg 1985–6: vii.

⁸ The definition is by Ruston from the *OCD*. On *ekphrasis* see also Heffernan 1993; Goldhill 1994; Webb 2009; and the contributions to the special issue on *ekphrasis* in *Classical Philology* 102 (2007), in particular the programmatic articles by Bartsch and Elsner 2007; Goldhill 2007.

eyes of the beholder have also been instructive for classical scholars working to establish different ways of looking in the ancient world: the aesthetic gaze (focused on the aesthetic qualities of artistic objects, such as statues), the erotic gaze (focused on the gendered features of the human body) and the religious gaze, to name just a few.⁹

What is the religious gaze? Jas Elsner and other scholars of ancient art history have recently established the existence of a specifically religious way of looking in the ancient world ('religious visuality').¹⁰ The religious gaze, according to Elsner, is oriented towards the ritual function of material artefacts, such as cult statues. The ritual-centred way of 'looking on' is different from other, competing forms of visuality, most notably, perhaps, from the traditional subject of Greek art history, the naturalism of classical *mimēsis*. Religious visuality is not concerned primarily with the aesthetic quality of objects and artefacts; its main focus is their function in religious ritual. Religious gazing applies whenever a viewer finds himself face-to-face with a material object (sanctuary, temple, statue) that lends itself as an entry point to religious and/or mythological reflection. It features prominently in Pausanias' *Description of Greece*, an account driven by the desire to ground the Greece of Pausanias' present (the second century CE) in a mythical and divine landscape of past glory through a focus on material objects.¹¹

Religious visuality also features in a more institutionalised form, however, as a central aspect of what Andrea Nightingale has recently referred to as the 'cultural practice' of *theōria*.¹² Ian Rutherford in his survey of *theōria* has sketched the

⁹ The different kinds of gaze, including the aesthetic and erotic, are described in Elsner 2007: xi–xvii. On the erotic gaze see also Goldhill 2001 and Vout 2007 (in the context of imperial Rome).

¹⁰ Elsner 1995: 88–124, 125–58; Elsner 2007: 29–66. See also Platt 2002.

¹¹ See Rutherford 2001; Hutton 2005; Elsner 2007: 29–48.

¹² Nightingale 2004: 40–71. On *theōria* see also Rutherford 1995, 2000, 2001 and, most recently, 2014. On the larger topic of religious pilgrimage (including *theōria*) in the Greco-Roman world, see the excellent collection of Elsner and Rutherford 2005. On pilgrimage see also Dillon 1997; Rutherford 2000.

semantic spectrum of this complex concept.¹³ *Theōria* and related words or idioms could be used in different contexts to refer to ‘a type of festival or show’, ‘being a spectator at a festival’, ‘a sacred delegation’, ‘a consultant at an oracle’, ‘an official sent out to announce festivals’ and ‘a state official’. More general uses include ‘sightseeing’ and ‘exploration’. The core meaning of the concept, however, seems to revolve around a key set of elements: *theōria* typically involved travel (the theoric journey), a sacralised mode of looking at a specific object or watching a theoric event, such as religious games, and, possibly, the return home and re-entry into society with a report of the things perceived and learned.¹⁴ There were three typical purposes of *theōria*: to visit a religious festival, to consult an oracle and to undertake a journey for one’s own instruction. While the first two can be carried out by an individual or a public delegation, the last existed only as purely personal experience, of which Solon’s travels after his reforms at Athens are an obvious example.¹⁵

Our story does not explicitly refer to Parmeniscus’ adventures as *theōria*. In fact, the concept of *theōria* is not mentioned at all, and the verb *theōrein* (to look at, to behold) is used only in regard to Parmeniscus’ activity at Delos when entering the temple of Leto. However, the story features – even highlights – key elements of *theōria*: travel to special religious sites such as oracles and temples, and gazing on a religious object (the statue). Of course we do not hear whether Parmeniscus originally travelled to Trophonius on state business, or whether his trip concerned religious or other matters, but it is certainly a deeply private concern that drives him to visit Delphi and later Delos. The incidents related in the story can therefore be read as a sequence of multiple acts of personal *theōria*.¹⁶

¹³ Rutherford 2000: 134–8. Rutherford’s account effectively supersedes various older attempts to outline the meaning of *theōros* and *theōria*, e.g. Bill 1901; Buck 1953; Koller 1957. Cf. ‘changing cultures of viewing’: Goldhill 1996.

¹⁴ Nightingale 2004: 40–4.

¹⁵ Hdt. 1.30. On Solon’s *theōria* see Rutherford 2000: 135, 142; Rutherford 2001: 48; Nightingale 2004: 63–4.

¹⁶ Rutherford 2000: 138–9 refers to Athenaeus’ text in passing as an example of a story that reports the viewing subject’s response to sacred objects.

Parmeniscus' first trip to the oracular institution of Trophonius initiates (and necessitates further) contact with the divine because his continued inability to laugh poses the problem that is put to the Delphic oracle.¹⁷ The response he receives at Delphi seems at first to send him back home, but it is not until he has travelled a third time, to the sacred island of Delos, that he reaches full insight and closure. Parmeniscus' three acts of *theōria* are linked in a complex triangular relationship of cross-reference and causation. The first two encounters with the gods share the formal identity of oracle consultations, but it is only when he faces the statue of Leto that his ability to laugh, a form of expression lost as a result of his first encounter with the divine at Trophonius, is restored. In an explosive act of parallel causation, his newly regained ability to laugh brings with it insight into the meaning of the Delphic oracle.

There are also differences between Parmeniscus' three encounters with the gods. The first two journeys are intentional acts of *theōria*, carried out to gain specific information from the gods. The third, which brings final insight, happens 'by chance' (*kata tychēn*) and without a specific question in mind.¹⁸ Specifically, the way in which this third encounter features in the story contributes to the scholarly debate surrounding the problems involved in distinguishing between sacred and secular *theōria*.¹⁹ Parmeniscus' final trip to Delos starts off as a case of secular *theōria*, directed towards the pure enjoyment of the island's touristic sites. Rather unexpectedly, it turns into a form of religious *theōria*, when he gains insight into both the poetics of divine representation (in the form of oracles and statues) and the inscrutable ways of divinity. The story shows that what defines religious *theōria* is not necessarily where it unfolds, nor on what kind of objects it is focused,

¹⁷ The temporary loss of the ability to laugh was a well-known effect of the oracular procedure at the oracle of Trophonius in Lebadeia (Boeotia). A detailed eyewitness account of the mantic procedure of the oracle during the second century CE can be found in Paus. 9.39.5–40.2. For a discussion of Pausanias' Trophonius see Pirenne-Delforge 2008: 325–31. On Trophonius see Bonnechere 2003. See also Dietrich 1965: 348–51; Clark 1968; Rosenberger 2001: 35–40.

¹⁸ Ath. 14.614B.

¹⁹ E.g. Rutherford 2000; Elsner and Rutherford 2005: 21–2; Scullion 2005.

as Rutherford and others have argued.²⁰ It is defined by a certain form of (religious) visuality, which is distinguished from other (worldly) ways of looking on.²¹

Statues and the Enquiry into Divinity

In order to understand what is at stake behind Parmeniscus' continued focus on divine representations, it may be worth bringing in cognitive theory and considering what it has to offer with regard to human perceptions of the divine. Cognitive approaches to religion variously stress the fact that anthropomorphism is a strategy of the human mind to come to terms with a profoundly complex, over-determined and potentially dangerous world.²² To survive in this world, the human mind is fundamentally hardwired to detect the presence of other agents (i.e. gods) which may potentially affect our lives.²³ One way of doing this is to look for the physical manifestations of such beings – the human inclination to see faces in random cloud formations in the sky. Another is to deduce the presence of such agents from the physical traces they allegedly leave – the inclination to wonder whether the manifestation of a highly unlikely occurrence is due to chance or reflects supernatural agency. From the cognitive point of view, religion is a 'system of thought and action for interpreting and influencing the world, built on anthropomorphic and animistic premises'.²⁴ Religion, in this perspective, appears to be a fundamentally human way of 'making sense' of the world.

The production of statues representing divinities is part of this more general human inclination to conceive of the world as inspired and meaningful. It grounds fairly abstract assumptions about the existence of supernatural agents firmly within the human sphere by giving them a physical presence. To give

²⁰ See Rutherford 2000: 139; Rutherford 2001: 43–4. See also Cohen 1992.

²¹ At the same time, religious *theōria* is also enacted and embodied in the most worldly and visceral of activities: laughter. On laughter in the context of Roman culture see now Beard 2014.

²² Guthrie 2007 with further literature.

²³ See e.g. Boyer 2001: 137–68; Andresen 2001; Guthrie 2001; Tremlin 2006: 107–42.

²⁴ Guthrie 2007: 37.

the gods a body – any body – allows humanity to seek to influence, perhaps even control, the world by interacting with these agents in a variety of tangible ways. Statues of Greek gods and goddesses were focal points of Greek religious discourse.²⁵ Often (though not always) they were housed in the temple of their respective divinity and represented this divinity in various ritual contexts.²⁶

Once ceremonially installed in their *naos*, the statues became the focus of prayer and worship. Some enjoyed offerings of food and drink in their temples and on the altars outside.²⁷ Others received specially made garments.²⁸ Every now and then some statues also left their homes and were carried through their host community in a sacred procession.²⁹ In these different rituals, statues served as focal points in human attempts to obtain divine favours, by offering the gods dedications, prayer and sacrifice. Cognitively speaking and put in more abstract terms: by visualising the existence of more powerful agents, by giving them a physical body and by incorporating them into a variety of rituals, humans seek to mediate between the vastness of the universe (those aspects which are beyond human grasp) and the necessities of everyday life.

One problem with cognitive approaches to religion is that while they may explain the neurological foundations of *all* religions rather well, it is harder to assess what they contribute to our understanding of *a particular* religious culture, such as that of the ancient Greeks. In order to move beyond general and generalising statements about the cognitive function of anthropomorphism and divine representations as such we must therefore subject the cognitive perspective itself to cultural

²⁵ See Burkert 1985: 88–92; Gladigow 1985–6; Vernant 1991c: 158–9; Gaifman 2006. See Mylonopoulos 2010: 1–19 on the difficult distinction between cult statue and votive statues.

²⁶ Temples were not a necessary precondition for the erection of a divine statue; statues could exist without temples. E.g. *ThesCRA* II, 418 (with further evidence). See Scheer 2000: 54–66 for rituals involving divine images.

²⁷ Burkert 1985: 89; Graf 2001: 230; Steiner 2001: 106–13.

²⁸ The most prominent example is arguably the new *peplos* which is handed over to Athena Polias at the festival of the Greater Panathenaea. See e.g. Barber 1992; Steiner 2001: 103. See also Graf 2001: 229, n. 10.

²⁹ Burkert 1985a: 100–1.

analysis: we must ask what is *specifically Greek* about how the divine body was imagined and represented – a line of enquiry which will eventually also bring us back to Parmeniscus and his puzzling response to Leto's image.

A striking feature of ancient Greek representations of divinity in statuary form is the fact that there are surprising differences in the extent to which they did or did not resemble the human body.³⁰ Starting from fairly simple representations of the gods made out of wood or metal during the Archaic period (later sometimes referred to as *xoana*), Greek statuary representation gradually moved towards more complex anthropomorphic sculptures, crafted in marble, bronze and ivory.³¹ In the fifth century BCE, this form of religious imagination and artistic workmanship saw its culmination in the famous chryselephantine statues, with golden robes draping ivory bodies around a wooden core.³² Divine statues like Phidias' acclaimed Zeus at Olympia (c. 430 BCE) and his Athena Parthenos of the Acropolis (c. 447–438 BCE) did not just aspire to imitate the human form, but frequently exceeded it in size and were also rendered as more perfect and gleaming than the human body. The *agalma* of the god or goddess was both a dedication to divinity and a representation and an evocation of it, 'glorious gifts in which the gods must also delight'.³³

Considering these developments it may be tempting to assume, as older scholarship has done, a gradual evolutionary progression from relatively simple, aniconic wooden statues to complex and fully anthropomorphic representations

³⁰ See Vernant 1991a: 35–6 with the point that Greek anthropomorphism did not imitate the human body, but that in Greek thought 'the human body reflects the divine model as the inexhaustible source of a vital energy'. On the problematic anthropomorphism of the Greek gods see also Henrichs 2010: 32–5.

³¹ As Donohue 1988: 121–50 has shown, *xoanon* came to mean archaic, wooden cult statue only relatively late, in the context of the iconoclastic polemic of the first century BCE. Until then the meaning of *xoanon* was much broader and much less clearly defined. It referred to different kinds of statues as well as to other carved objects. See Donohue 1988: 9–53.

³² Burkert 1985a: 91. For the chryselephantine statues see in particular Lapatin 2001.

³³ Burkert 1985a: 91. This gleaming quality is sometimes also captured in white paint in depictions of statues on vases, see Schefold 1937: 66.

of divinity.³⁴ Even though the Greeks were eventually able to craft fully anthropomorphic statues, however, aniconic representations never went completely out of fashion. Indeed, iconic modes of divine representation coexisted with more simple, semi-iconic or aniconic ways of indicating the presence of the Greek gods.³⁵ The Argive Heraion, for example, accommodated two cult images when Pausanias visited it: a gold and ivory statue of the goddess (by Polycleitus) *and* a much older and simpler representation of the same goddess.³⁶ Another example is the Athenian Acropolis, which came to house several representations of Athena, including the colossal chryselephantine statue of Athena Parthenos (by Phidias) and a much older and simpler representation of Athena Polias, which, according to Pausanias, had once fallen from the sky.³⁷

Because of the continued presence in Greek sanctuaries of the older, aniconic statues and their continuous involvement in Greek religious ritual, classical scholars have come to see different types of sculptural representations of the Greek gods as complementary and competing statements of Greek religious discourse concerning the nature of divinity.³⁸ All divine images have to mediate between two diverging thoughts: the general otherworldliness of the supernatural on the one hand, and the need to make the supernatural tangible and available to human interaction/knowledge on the other. Fritz Graf speaks of two divergent necessities that motivate and quite literally shape divine representations: the necessity to make the absent (and ultimately unknowable) present and the necessity of maintaining the ontological gap separating humanity from divinity.³⁹ The result is a fundamental ‘ambivalence’ (Graf) of all divine images between human productions and divine representations.⁴⁰

³⁴ See e.g. Richter 1950. See Donohue 1988; Spivey 1996: 29; Gaifman 2010 for a criticism of this perspective.

³⁵ Donohue 1988: 5 defines the worship of aniconic sculptures as ‘the veneration of objects that represent but do not purport to show the appearance of deities’.

³⁶ Paus. 2.17.4–5. See Romano 1980: 3 with further examples.

³⁷ Paus. 1.24.5–1.26.7. See also Herington 1955; Graf 2001: 236.

³⁸ See e.g. Gordon 1979; Steiner 2001: 103; Graf 2001: 237–43; Gaifman 2010: 67.

³⁹ Graf 2001: 234–5.

⁴⁰ Graf 2001: 229.

The cruder and less naturalistic form of the semi- and aniconic statues highlights the discrepancy between divinity and its material representation in a much more immediate way than iconic representations of divinity. They virtually compel the viewer to acknowledge the very fact that humanity can never engage with divinity directly – only by mediation. As Steiner put it, ‘concealment and containment ... form two dimensions of the single enterprise: in assuming a form or body not his or her own, the god simultaneously masks and contains an untenable force’.⁴¹ The aniconic statue demarcates the presence of divinity, not by imitating the human body: its crude form captures and underscores the gulf between the human and the divine spheres.

By contrast, iconic sculptural representations of divinity externalise the divine essence: they communicate the otherworldliness of the divine through a surplus of splendour and bodily perfection.⁴² Literary sources describing iconic sculpture abound in words expressing the shining radiance of artistic workmanship. Gold, silver, bronze and marble brought out the otherworldly quality of the gods in the very material of their cult images.⁴³

What does Parmeniscus see when he enters the temple of Leto? We cannot know. Although the Letoon at Delos was excavated by the French, the wooden statue of the goddess had perished long before. Nonetheless, we can at least get an idea if we look more carefully at what remains of the temple. Cult statues, like the one of the goddess Leto at Delos, were not just stashed away in some dark corner: they were typically placed on a pedestal in the middle of the *naos*. Excavations at Delos have revealed the foundations of the base on which Leto’s statue was placed, and from these foundations, measuring 2.20 by 2.90 metres, we can infer that the statue was probably considerably larger than life.⁴⁴ Moreover, the very temple

⁴¹ Steiner 2001: 81. See also Vernant 1991c: 153–5.

⁴² Steiner 2001: 104.

⁴³ See Gordon 1979: 13; Vernant 1991a: 36–45.

⁴⁴ Gallet de Santerre 1959: 44 with plates IV, XXXV (6). It is, of course, also a possibility that a second pedestal with a much smaller statue was placed upon the foundations, but there is no archaeological evidence for this.

inventory of the Letoon that mentions Parmiscus' dedication also provides information on the cult statue.⁴⁵ From the inscription we learn that Leto was indeed made of wood, that she was clothed in a linen chiton and mantle, and that she was wearing sandals. We also read that she was seated on a wooden throne inlaid with tortoise shell and ivory.⁴⁶

Experience and Expectation

When Parmeniscus crosses the threshold of the temple of Leto and looks at the statue of the goddess, he enters a distinctly religious space.⁴⁷ But he does not seem to find what he expected. The shape and quality of the larger-than-life statue appear to direct Parmeniscus' gaze to its own crude materiality, rather than to its role as a representation of divinity. The aesthetic dimension of the statue (or rather, the lack of it), at least at first sight, seems to deny it any role as the focal point of religious discourse. Through the eyes of the viewing subject, Leto's 'looks' are presented as quite literally laughable.

It may be tempting to point out that in highlighting Parmeniscus' amusement the story reflects typically Hellenistic or later expectations of how divinity should be represented: but this would be to misunderstand the principles and practices of divine representation in ancient Greek religion more generally. From the epic tradition onwards there is a clear expectation that the gods look like men.⁴⁸ Representations of men, however, gradually become naturalistic from the seventh century onwards, and so do representations of divinity.⁴⁹ Parmeniscus'

⁴⁵ *IDélos* 1417 AI, 100–17.

⁴⁶ More information on Leto's possessions comes to us from the epigraphic evidence: for example, that her *himation* was adorned with purple dye in the third century BCE. See *IG XI* 154 A, 21–2; see also Romano 1980: 203.

⁴⁷ Of course Parmeniscus already entered religious space when he entered the sanctuary. The temple, however, provides a much more immediate framing for the viewing of the cult statue it housed. It therefore makes sense that the story refers to the temple (and not the sanctuary) to highlight the transition (and transformation) of the viewing subject. On the temple as a frame for the viewing of a divine statue see also Graf 2001: 234.

⁴⁸ See e.g. Vernant 1980: 36–9. On epiphany see Platt 2011 and Petridou 2016.

⁴⁹ See Osborne 1998: 75–85, 159–63.

encounter with Leto flags the representation of divinity in the human sphere as a problem intrinsic to ancient Greek religion as early as its representation in epic poetry.

However, the clash between aniconic and iconic representations of divinity changed over time. By the fifth century BCE, the fully anthropomorphic images of the Greek gods and goddesses had become default objects of religious veneration.⁵⁰ In particular the statues produced by famous artists (such as Phidias' Zeus or Praxiteles' Aphrodite of Cnidus) were sometimes visited for the purpose of sightseeing and appreciation of their aesthetic qualities. To be sure, the older, aniconic statues were still present, but they had come to fill the role of an altogether different category of divine representation. Graf speaks of a 'dichotomy of function' between the two types of images. On the one hand, there were the fully anthropomorphic cult statues which provided a focal point of human-divine encounter and which signified the principal (if never complete) availability of the divine to human interaction and knowledge.⁵¹ On the other hand, the older, semi- or aniconic divine statues crafted out of wood assumed a more subversive role. They always had a peculiar air about them, but, as in our story, they feature increasingly in contexts in which they highlight a reversal of the ordinary and the expected and, in doing so, confront onlookers with their own expectations of the divine.⁵²

Parmeniscus clearly expected to find a glorious and dazzling representation of Apollo's mother: νομίζων τῆς Ἀπόλλωνος μητρὸς ἀγαλμὰ τι θεωρήσειν ἀξιόλογον, 'He assumed that the statue of Apollo's mother would be something noteworthy to gaze at.'⁵³ What he found instead was an unsightly statue alluding to the human bodily form, its wooden origins still all too visible: ἰδὼν δ' αὐτὸ ξύλον ὃν ἄμορφον παραδόξως ἐγέλασεν, 'But when he saw that it was just a misshapen piece of wood

⁵⁰ Vernant 1980: 152; Graf 2001: 236–8.

⁵¹ Graf 2001: 237.

⁵² The post-Classical period witnessed the emergence of various narratives, which feature semi- or aniconic divine statues in a way that directs human attention to the manifold ways in which divinity reveals itself. See e.g. Paus. 10.19.3. For further examples see e.g. Donohue 1988: 237–76; Steiner 2001: 82–5.

⁵³ Ath. 14.614B (= Kaibel 14.2).

he unexpectedly burst into laughter.’⁵⁴ In depicting the clash between Parmeniscus’ expectation of the divine and his experience of it the story reflects the tension between aniconic and iconic representations of divinity.

Elsner has pointed out that ‘viewing the sacred is a process of divesting the spectator of all the social and discursive elements which distinguish his or her subjectivity from that of the gods into whose space the viewer will come’.⁵⁵ Religious visuality unfolds in and defines a distinctly religious space in which the experiences and expectations of everyday life are temporarily set aside to enable a more immediate encounter with the divine, an encounter that follows its own (religious) rules and regulations. ‘Ritual-centred visuality denies the appropriateness of ... interpreting images through the rules and desires of everyday life.’⁵⁶

Parmeniscus’ experience at Delos, as told by Athenaeus/Semus, highlights the very moment of ‘divesting’ as a precondition of experiencing the true nature of the divine. The whole account hinges on Parmeniscus’ sudden, almost explosive, transition from a state of ignorance to a state of insight and learning. Parmeniscus first appreciates the island’s attractions from a purely aesthetic point of view. The word used to describe his gaze prior to entering the temple of Leto is *thaumazein*, to wonder, to marvel at. When Parmeniscus finally enters the temple, he extends this aesthetic visuality to the statue of the goddess. But the statue of Leto does not provide a trajectory for the aesthetic gaze. It redirects this gaze back to the viewing subject. The surprise caused by the apparent drastic mismatch between his expectations and the actual manifestation of the divine statue triggers Parmeniscus’ laughter. In doing so it prepares him for the transition from an externalised gaze, focused on the surface of things and on the ornamental, to a much deeper religious vision, based on an aesthetics that appreciates the specific mode of representation of the aniconic statue. The

⁵⁴ Ath. 14.614B.

⁵⁵ Elsner 2007: 23.

⁵⁶ Elsner 2007: 25.

purely external appreciation of aesthetic qualities turns into a deeper, more penetrating and complex vision, focused on the quality of divinity, in particular of divine representation. This form of *thaumazein* does not precede the form of understanding reached through *theōria* but is part of the theoric gaze.⁵⁷ Parmeniscus' laughter, we may assume, changes in quality as it becomes self-reflective.⁵⁸ It starts off as a naïve and unreflected response to the apparent crudeness of divine form and turns into an astonished appreciation of the complexities of divine representation as Parmeniscus grasps the meaning of the oracle.⁵⁹

The series of incidents related in the story draw direct and multiple links between representations of divinity in the form of speech (oracles) and statues. The story directly juxtaposes the ambiguous oracle Parmeniscus receives at Delphi with the statue of Leto and its means of signifying: the temporary breakdown of divine representation (the fact that the statue does not conform to Parmeniscus' expectations) brings about the revelation of divine meaning (the oracle). The story highlights the visual aspect of *theōria* as a cultural institution while at the same time drawing our attention to the very fact that

⁵⁷ On *thaumazein* as part of *theōria* see Nightingale 2004: 261.

⁵⁸ Halliwell 2008: 5 speaks of the 'double-sided character' of laughter in Greek thought and literature 'at the interface ... between body and mind, between instinct and intention'. In our story laughter appears likewise as a double-sided gesture that accompanies, even instigates, the transition from a state of ignorance to a state of insight.

⁵⁹ Commenting on a previously published version of this chapter, Mary Beard disagrees with my reading of this passage (Beard 2014: 174–6). She suggests that the primary point of the story at hand is not competing modes of divine representation, but the correct interpretation of an enigmatic divine oracle. She argues further that there is no indication of a change in the quality or, indeed, the focus of Parmeniscus' laughter. What Beard favours here is, I think, a quite literal reading of the story. Clearly the reader, who views the situation through the experience of its central character, realises that there is more to Parmeniscus' laughter than his apparent amusement at the unexpected sight of a crude divine statue. Besides, I see absolutely no reason why one would want to play out the different dimensions of the story against each other and say that the story provides a 'lesson' on correct interpretation rather than religious visuality (see Beard 2014: 175). The point of storytelling and, in particular, of telling stories about Delphi is rarely to provide 'lessons', but to point to the multiple dimensions of human experience. In this particular story the focus is squarely on the different forms of divine representation in themselves and in interaction with each other.

religious visibility extends far beyond the physical act of gazing. Oracles, too, draw on elements of pictorial signification. In the metaphors and other tropes they use as carriers of their meaning, oracles make use of images in much the same way as divine statues.

The link between the semantics of both types of imagery is reflected through the perception of the viewing subject. Parmeniscus responds to both representations of divinity – oracles and statues – in exactly the same way. His encounters with the divine are driven by his expectations concerning the nature of divinity, in particular of divine representation in the human sphere. Parmeniscus expects oracles to speak in human language, characterised by the attempt to minimise ambiguity in order to maximise success in the transmission of information. Except perhaps in poetic language, which draws explicitly on polysemy, in the human sphere ambiguity is nothing but a semantic possibility prior to its realisation in actual speech. The fact that Parmeniscus is not yet ready to engage in this other type of visibility (which is, at least to some extent, disengaged from personal circumstance) is nicely expressed by the very fact that he can conceive of the ‘mother’ featuring in the oracular response as referring only to his own.⁶⁰ Religious visibility involves a much broader and more detached way of ‘reading’ images.

Just as Parmeniscus expects the oracle to speak in plain human language, he assumes that divine statues represent divinity in human form. Both expectations are frustrated in the end. Parmeniscus’ first response is to suspect deception (οἰόμενος ἐξηπατήσθαι, ‘he believed that he had been deceived’).⁶¹ This suspicion is typical of mortals in Greek thought and literature who cannot (yet) read the poetics of divine representation.⁶² Jean-Pierre Vernant speaks of the ‘inevitable tension’ that all

⁶⁰ A similar mistake is made by the sons of the Roman king Tarquinius Superbus: Livy 1.56.10.

⁶¹ Ath. 14.614A (= Kaibel 14.2).

⁶² E.g. the complaint of Croesus at the Delphic oracle in Hdt. 1.90–1 and the chorus’ suspicions towards the Delphic response in E. *Ion* 685.

forms of divine representations must introduce: ‘the idea is to establish real contact with the world beyond, to actualise it, to make it present, and thereby to participate intimately in the divine; yet by the same move, it (the divine idol) must also emphasise what is inaccessible and mysterious in divinity, its alien quality, its otherness’.⁶³ Parmeniscus does not yet understand the subtle balance between identity and alterity that every divine representation must strike if it is to remain a meaningful mediator between the human and divine spheres.⁶⁴ He eventually learns to adopt a much deeper gaze that penetrates the surface of verbal and material images in order to capture what lies beneath.

In depicting Parmeniscus’ change of perspective, the story draws attention to larger questions concerning the identity of divinity and its representation in the human sphere. It is significant that Parmeniscus learns that the gods *are and are not* like mortals by gazing at two images – one evoked in oracular language, one material – both of which challenge and support the anthropomorphism of the Greek gods. The oracular reference to Leto as Apollo’s mother confirms the structure of the pantheon as parallel to the human sphere, with its family and other relations. Parmeniscus’ subsequent encounter with the wooden statue of Apollo’s mother, in contrast, seems to question the notion of anthropomorphic gods by drawing attention to the image’s (wooden) materiality and the divine otherness it represents.

In drawing the connection between imagery crafted in word and in wood, Parmeniscus’ multiple encounters with the divine encourage us to compare both forms of divine representation.⁶⁵ Plain oracular language and iconic sculptures of gods and goddesses provide a way of representing divinity that emphasises the commonalities between the human and divine spheres. Both forms of divine representation are oriented

⁶³ Vernant 1991c: 153. See also Vernant 1991b: 314–17.

⁶⁴ On oracular ambiguity as a mediation triplet see Kindt 2008 and the conclusion to this book.

⁶⁵ Vernant 1991c: 154 argues that archaic idols are not images *stricto sensu*.

towards humanity as the ultimate point of reference for the visualisation and imagination of the divine. Ambiguous divine language and the semi-iconic representation of divinity, in contrast, direct attention to the fact that divinity *is and is not* like humanity. According to the same logic, unintelligible sounds and utterances and the aniconic representation of divinity ultimately emphasise alterity and the gap between gods and mortals.⁶⁶

It is significant that a breakdown in the iconic sculptural representation of the statue yields insight into the ambiguous meaning of the oracle. In juxtaposing both forms of divine representation, the story turns on much more than the simple point that images represent divinity in a way that may look surprisingly different at first. Parmeniscus' encounter with the gods defines religious visuality as a complex way of engaging with the divine, which interacts with humanity in different and changing representations.

Through its narrative appropriation of the religious gaze, the story reflects on the very semantics of religion as a discourse of 'making sense'. The subject's gaze on the divine statue itself becomes a trope for reflection on the nature of divinity and its relationship to humanity.⁶⁷ Parmeniscus' encounter with the divine turns into a commentary on the modalities of religious visuality.⁶⁸ By referring to generally recognised religious authorities like the Delphic oracle, the story also gives a certain authority to the religious statements it makes in this respect.

⁶⁶ Unintelligible speech emphasising the gap between the human and divine spheres features prominently in a passage in Plutarch, in which he describes an oracle consultation going wrong: Plu. *Moralia* 438B. A non-Greek delegation to Delphi tried to consult the Pythia despite an omen indicating that she was not ready to deliver oracles. The divine response to the human attempt to force the Pythia to deliver oracles is expressed via the Pythia's language, which is rough and unintelligible.

⁶⁷ It is fitting that this story is built around Parmeniscus, a philosopher, since *theōria* (albeit more frequently in its civic form) was widely appropriated in philosophical discourse as a trope for understanding and learning. See Nightingale 2004.

⁶⁸ On the debate concerning the problematic distinction between sacred and secular in Greek culture see Connor 1988.

**Religious Visuality as ‘Ritual-Centred Visuality’ and
‘Cognitive Visuality’**

As I have stated above, Elsner conceives of religious viewing as ritual-centred viewing.⁶⁹ Religious gazing conceives of sacred objects (altars, cult statues) by appreciating, even insisting, on the role these objects play in religious ritual. In other words, the religious gaze captures predominantly those qualities of altars and cult statues that are significant for the part they play in religious ritual; other information pertaining to these objects (such as aesthetic qualities, not relevant to how they feature in ritual) is left out. Elsner has further explored the ways in which religious gazing features in Greek literature. He has shown that the narrative structure of a text itself can follow (and hence describe) the physical act of gazing. A prime example is Pausanias’ description of sixty-nine altars at Olympia, which closely follows the liturgical order of the Elean sacrificial procession and highlights those features of the altars relevant to their role in ritual.⁷⁰

The story, however, suggests that religious visibility should not be limited to ritual-centred visibility. In fact, ritual is conspicuously absent from Parmeniscus’ multiple encounters with the divine. We hear nothing about the ritual procedure at Trophonius that ultimately causes the inability to laugh or at Delphi that generates oracular responses. Nor do we learn anything about the kind of purifications, sacrifices and prayers involved in the worship of the goddess Leto at Delos. Instead, the story focuses on the statue’s impact on the viewing subject, in particular on the gap that Parmeniscus needs to bridge between its form and content. The structure of the narrative turns entirely on Parmeniscus’ change of perspective as he learns to appreciate the nature of divinity: his original expectation of divine representations that remains unfulfilled, his interpretative disengagement from his own personal circumstances and his insight into the versatility of the divine and its representation. In the story,

⁶⁹ Here and below see Elsner 2007: 1–26.

⁷⁰ Paus. 5.13.8–15.12 discussed by Elsner 2007: 13–19.

at least, religious visuality is represented as a mental (cognitive) activity, as an insight gained into the nature of divinity and not a mere extension of ritual. Religious gazing, we can conclude, should encompass both ‘cognitive visuality’ and ‘ritual-centred visuality’ – without, of course, assuming a strict duality between the two.

In tracing Parmeniscus’ change of perspective, the story makes an interesting point about the problematic relationship between the sacred and the secular dimensions.⁷¹ One area in which this distinction is currently under scholarly discussion is with regard to *theōria* and Greek pilgrimage more generally.⁷² Is it possible to distinguish sacred from secular (purely recreational) sightseeing? Rutherford suggests that whenever the places visited were religious centres, we should speak of ‘sacred sightseeing’.⁷³ He further argues that the kind of objects viewed may also help differentiate ‘sacred sightseeing’ from the secular variant. Religious objects were prime foci of religious travel. For Rutherford their presence can thus serve as a marker of *theōria* as ‘sacred sightseeing’: ‘because the viewing of them took place against the background of a network of religious assumptions it can be described as a religious activity’.⁷⁴

The story told by Athenaeus/Semus, however, complicates the picture. It shows that the presence of neither religious space nor religious objects is a sufficient indicator for religious viewing. Parmeniscus employs both types of visuality, religious visuality and another, more worldly (one might say secular) kind of viewing, spatially within the strictly religious context of the Delphic oracle and the temple of Leto.

⁷¹ The *communis opinio* now seems to be that Greek culture knew no absolute distinction between the two. Connor has shown the sacred and the secular to be two separate yet interrelated realms: Connor 1988. Disagreement, however, erupts concerning the way in which this relationship features in specific contexts, e.g. Scullion 2005.

⁷² See now Rutherford 2014, in particular 4–6. As Rutherford 2000: 138, n. 26 has rightly observed, the visual is strangely absent from Dillon’s account of Greek pilgrimage: Dillon 1997.

⁷³ Rutherford 2000: 135. See also the contribution by Cohen 1992, who argues that pilgrims travel to the centre of their world and tourists to the periphery.

⁷⁴ Rutherford 2000: 139.

Conclusion

Moreover, he extends both types of visibility to distinctly religious representations: just as he misreads the Delphic oracle, he initially looks at the divine statue in the temple with an aesthetic gaze. Parmeniscus' first way of looking is shaped less by religious than by worldly assumptions. What finally enables him to make the transition from one type of visibility to the other is his capacity to separate his interpretation from his own personal circumstances. In the story, at least, the distinction between the sacred and the secular (here expressed in the form of different, yet related, types of visibility) is neither solely spatially configured nor solely object-related, but cognitive. The frame of mind with which one enters a given space and looks at a specific object determines whether religious visibility (and hence information processing) applies – or not. In short, what matters is less what one looks at, or where one looks, but how.

Conclusion

If all this seems a rather large structure to build on a single story, then it may be worth pointing out that the sustained focus on one particular account has revealed not just the religious images and modes of thought contained within it, but also the broader religious concepts and discourses to which this story relates and from which it derives its meaning. In order to illuminate the particular entanglement between oracles and statues in this particular story, we have drawn multiple lines between the text and its cultural and intellectual contexts, gradually recovering the religious concepts, modes of thought, symbolic systems and religious discourses that informed Parmeniscus' various encounters with the divine.

Like the previous story, the narrative about Parmeniscus parades the success and failure in human efforts to 'make sense' of the divine as it manifests itself in the human sphere in the form of statues and oracles. Yet, in doing so, it reverberates not just with the stories discussed in the [previous chapter](#). Like so

many oracle stories discussed in this book, the peculiar story about laughter first lost and later found as told by Athenaeus/Semus ultimately turns out to be a story about human knowledge of the divine. It invites us into a very Greek conversation about the scope and limits of this knowledge.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

Religion and Storytelling in Ancient Greece

Ancient Greek religion was, in a fundamental way, a religion of the story. Consider, for example, the significance of the famous narratives about the gods and goddesses told by Homer and Hesiod for later Greek perceptions of divinity; or the multiple roles that individual gods, such as Apollo and Athena, play in ancient Greek tragedy; or, indeed, the ongoing place of the divine throughout that form of storytelling that constitutes the historiographic tradition from Herodotus onwards. Even an apparently ‘enlightened’ author such as Thucydides still had a lot to say about the divine, despite his well-documented efforts to edit the supernatural out of human history as much as possible.¹ And we have not even touched upon several types of representations of the Greek gods and goddesses (e.g. in the form of funerary reliefs, as statues or on pots) which feature their very own modes of storytelling. These examples illustrate a remarkable propensity of ancient Greek views about the supernatural to draw on different kinds of narratives to evolve: storytelling is indeed central to the way ideas about the gods circulated in ancient Greece.

Yet, despite the centrality of narrative to ancient Greek views about the supernatural, it is surprising to find that this aspect of ancient Greek religion has not yet received the scholarly attention it deserves.² There are many reasons for this. There is still, for example, a marked tendency in classical scholarship to ‘mine’

¹ Hornblower 1992.

² Noticeable exceptions to this are: Eidinow 2011; Johnston 2015a, 2015b, 2015c; Hawes 2014.

literary texts for information on ancient Greek religious beliefs and practices. More frequently than not, this involves divorcing the religious content from its narrative form, with the ultimate goal of describing a reality beyond the text. Some scholars have also trodden a different path and investigated the religious views of individual authors such as Herodotus, Xenophon or Plato – or, indeed, of entire genres, such as ancient Greek oratory, tragedy or historiography.³ Yet what has largely remained subject to debate is if and how such ‘intellectualist’ or ‘literary’ religions are part of ‘lived’ religious beliefs and practices.⁴

Moreover, to investigate the religious views in and of these authors and genres is not the same as enquiring into the principles and practices by which these views are presented to us through narrative. One approach seeks to extract information from a text to describe the ‘religion’ of its author or the genre in which he wrote; the other values narrative as an essential part of that information – as an important way in which this author or genre uses religion to ‘make sense’ of the world. If storytelling is considered at all in classical scholarship, it is mainly as a literary device and as a means to an end, which, once deciphered, can safely be ignored.

Surprisingly, perhaps, the study of myth is no exception to this rule. Myth has widely been perceived, in the influential definition of Walter Burkert, to be ‘a traditional tale with secondary, partial reference to something of collective importance’.⁵ Yet the scholarly focus here too has always been squarely on discovering and describing this ‘secondary’ – societal or cultural – ‘reference’ rather than on the status of mythological narratives as ‘traditional tales’. This applies even to structuralist readings of ancient Greek mythology, which use the literary network of themes and correspondences as a pathway to the meaning of a mythological tale. But, again, this meaning was

³ On the ‘religion’ of these authors see McPherran 1996 (Plato); Harrison 2000 (Herodotus); Bowden 2004 (Xenophon); Parker 2004 (Xenophon). For the way in which religious beliefs and practices are represented in certain genres see Mikalson 1991 (tragedy), 2010 (philosophy); Sourvinou-Inwood 1997 (tragedy); Martin 2009 (oratory); Fowler 2010 (historiography).

⁴ The debate is discussed in detail in Willey 2015 (with examples).

⁵ Burkert 1979: 23.

Approaching the Oracle (Story)

found more on the socio-cultural level and not so much in the significance of narrative and storytelling as such.⁶

There is nothing wrong with such perspectives and approaches. All of them have revealed invaluable information on ancient Greek religious beliefs and practices. Yet as a result of this focus, certain questions pertaining to the role of narrative in the context of ancient Greek religion have not featured prominently in classical scholarship to date.⁷ A systematic and comprehensive study of the role of narrative and storytelling in ancient Greek religion is still lacking.

This book does not offer such a study. Its goals are much more modest. It has focused on a particular subset of religious stories, which throughout this investigation I have referred to as ‘Delphic oracle stories’ – accounts of prediction and fulfilment as they feature in large numbers throughout Greek thought and literature, accounts which revolve around a prophecy claiming Delphic origins. I have investigated how different authors, writing in different genres and at different points in time, told Delphic oracle stories. A key focus has been on how the interpretation of the oracle is related to our need to interpret the story as such.

What remains to be done in terms of a conclusion is to formulate some more general insights into what the previous chapters have shown: how do these stories construct and convey meaning? What does narrative contribute to the religious views expressed in these stories? And what do the case studies of the previous chapters reveal about the nexus of religion and storytelling in ancient Greece?

Approaching the Oracle (Story)

Throughout, this study has foregrounded the narrative aspect of oracle stories, no matter who told them, when or for what

⁶ Examples of this approach are too numerous to list here. Good examples of the socio-cultural approach are e.g. Detienne 1972; Burkert 1979. For a comprehensive discussion of different approaches to myth see Csapo 2005.

⁷ An exception is Buxton’s views on the nature of Greek myth in Buxton 2013: 161–72.

purpose. The reason for this is that oracle stories, whether they reflect real or imaginary events or both, rely on narrative to evolve. In the introductory chapter, I argued that oracle stories are perhaps best understood if we sideline questions of authenticity and historicity that have dominated much scholarship in the past. Indeed, I launched my own investigation of these tales from the premise that, rather than trying to separate fact from fiction in these accounts, we should follow the flow of these narratives and appreciate their way of looking at the world.

The outlook and structure of this study reflects such considerations. Oracle stories are best studied within the larger context of the work in which they feature. Once we acknowledge that narrative is central to the way in which these stories evolve it is evident that we need to investigate them in the larger narrative context of which they are part.⁸ Five individual chapters have investigated how different authors told such stories as part of their larger works. Three examples from the late fifth and early fourth century BCE (Herodotus, Euripides and Plato) were followed by two 'late' ones from the second/third century CE (Athenaeus and Pausanias). Each chapter has investigated the way in which a particular telling of an oracle story related to its historical context as well as to the rules and conventions of the larger genre of which it was part.

Why these and not other authors and genres? The focus texts of the individual chapters stand for a much broader array of sources, both chronologically and in terms of genre. They serve as examples of how oracle stories evolve in different texts and contexts, and at different points in time.

Of course there would have been a number of other authors who could just as well have been included in this study: Aristophanes comes immediately to mind (who provides us with several comic renderings of prophecies).⁹ I could also

⁸ Incidentally, this is also the reason why we cannot possibly capture the meaning of oracle stories by merely describing their contents. By dissecting contents into different modes and topics, as Fontenrose (1978, e.g. 11–57) has done, we run the real risk of depriving them of their narrative essence.

⁹ On which see e.g. Muecke 1998.

have included a chapter about the role of the oracular in the writings of Xenophon, whose interest in Delphi and prophecies was almost as great as that of Herodotus.¹⁰ Other obvious choices could have included Thucydides, who is generally considered to be more critical than Herodotus of the place of oracles and religion in the writing of history but whose *History of the Peloponnesian War* nevertheless tells a number of oracle stories.¹¹ An even broader selection could have included Delphic oracle stories told outside of Greek thought and literature, for example in Latin literature (Cicero, Livy), or in the frictions between the traditional religions of Greece and Rome and the emerging Christian faith (tangible in the writings of Julian and Oenomaus/Eusebius).¹²

Yet it is unlikely that such a broadening of scope would have fundamentally altered the picture. The reason for this is that throughout the individual chapters of this book, a remarkable coherence has emerged among oracle stories told by different authors, in different genres and at different points in time. Even though different authors told oracle stories in different ways and to different ends, we have found remarkable consistency in their accounts. This is due partly to the fact that many of these stories follow a basic structure, focusing in on the human quest for meaning as expressed in the question put to the oracle, the delivery of the prediction, various attempts at interpreting the prophecy and its eventual fulfilment. It is further supported by a number of themes that are typically developed in these stories, including (but not limited to) the infamously enigmatic language of the oracle, the human puzzlement and misinterpretation inevitably resulting from it and the surprising revelation of the oracle's meaning in the end.

¹⁰ See Fontenrose 1978: 457–8 for a list of references to Delphic oracles in Xenophon.

¹¹ Oracle stories in Thucydides: e.g. Th. 1.25.1, 1.103.2, 1.118.3, 3.92.5. For a complete list see Fontenrose 1978: 45. Religion in Thucydides: e.g. Hornblower 1992. Oracles in Thucydides: Oost 1975; Marinatos 1981; Dover 1988; Demont 1990.

¹² See the relevant entries in the *index locorum* of Fontenrose 1978: 454 (Julian) and 455 (Oenomaus) for complete lists of references to Delphic prophecies in these authors.

This consistency illustrates the existence of a powerful discourse in the ancient Greek world – to which I have, throughout this study, referred as the *oracular discourse*. At the core of this discourse, however, we have found a sustained and ongoing conversation about the nature of divinity and its availability to human knowledge. My attempts to listen in on this conversation throughout the individual chapters of this book emerge as part of my larger efforts – developed in detail in *Rethinking Greek Religion* – to reinstate a genuinely religious dimension to the study of ancient Greek religion (and the reading of oracles) which complements the more common socio-political account.¹³

The ‘theology’ of the oracle story then emerges from the common themes and patterns around which the conversation revolved.¹⁴ No matter who told a particular oracle story and for what purpose, *all* stories investigated in this book depict the human desire to know and to participate in the omniscient knowledge of the Greek gods. In all instances the fulfilment of this desire is at least temporarily delayed, throwing humanity back onto its own skills in interpretation: will the enquirer be able to make sense of the divine prediction?

Differences, then, emerge merely in how the individual tellers of Delphic oracle stories depict and frame the human response to this problem. Of all those challenged by enigmatic prophecies in the preceding chapters of this book, Plato’s Socrates certainly made the most of it. He presented his form of philosophical investigation as an ongoing exercise in oracular interpretation. Others were less successful, less aware of the way in which prophecies impart meaning. The citizens of Thasos learned their lesson the hard way; Parmeniscus learnt his together with the much hoped for outcome; and Herodotus’ Croesus did not even notice that there was a problem until it was too late.

¹³ See Kindt 2012a, in particular 12–35.

¹⁴ The theology of the oracle story is fleshed out in more detail below. On ancient Greek theologies see also Eidinow, Kindt and Osborne 2016.

Enigmatic Oracles in an Enigmatic World

The *enigmatic mode* – the obscure language in which the oracle is frequently thought to speak to those human beings trying to access the superior knowledge of the gods – is central to the challenge these and other protagonists of Delphic oracle stories face. What is its significance within the oracular discourse? Before we answer this question we may pause briefly and consider what is meant by ‘enigmatic mode’.

‘Ambiguity’ is certainly the more common way to refer to this peculiar aspect of human–divine communication. Yet in the previous chapters I have largely avoided speaking about ‘oracular ambiguity’. This is because not all enigmatic oracles are actually, strictly speaking, ambiguous. The oracle allegedly delivered to Chaerephon about Socrates’ wisdom, for example ([chapter 3](#)) was merely vague rather than ambiguous. Nevertheless, like an ambiguous response, it challenged the philosopher to investigate its meaning and thereby to enquire much more deeply into the scope and limits of all human knowledge. Other Delphic oracles contain homonyms or other tropes rather than real ambiguities. Given the multiplicity of ways in which oracles refer to the world, ‘the enigmatic mode’ seemed the more appropriate description of the manifold ways in which the oracular voice speaks to us as an inspired voice.

Traditionally, classical scholarship has subsumed the discussion of the ‘the enigmatic mode’ under the question of a response’s authenticity. The presence of it in a particular oracle is at times taken as an indicator of this response being authentic, at others to argue the opposite. For example, some scholars have maintained that enigmatic oracles employ a form of diplomatic obscurity, allowing the oracle to cover its tracks, no matter what the outcome of a given course of events would be.¹⁵ The response frequently referred to in this context is the famous Delphic oracle given to Croesus in book 2 of Herodotus’ *Histories*, predicting that if he wages

¹⁵ E.g. this line of argument features variously in the study of Delphic prophecies by Parke and Wormell 1956 and is also the underlying criterion for many of Fontenrose’s (1978) assessments of the authenticity of individual responses.

war on the Persians he would destroy a great empire.¹⁶ The point here is of course that the prophecy would be fulfilled no matter what the outcome of the war between the Lydians and the Persians was.¹⁷

However, if we consider the entire body of predictions from Delphi, such responses are extremely rare. Indeed, this seems to be the only oracle which covers both outcomes of a given course of events. Other enigmatic responses anticipate futures which are much more open in the sense that there are more than two possible scenarios at stake. The way in which the prophecies typically become fulfilled towards the end of an oracle story is frequently too far-fetched to have been taken into account when the oracle was allegedly delivered at Delphi. That is to say that the response becomes true in a way that nobody – not even the Pythia – could have foretold. The ‘enigmatic mode’ in such unlikely accounts of prediction and fulfilment has hence frequently been taken as an indicator of an oracle (and the surrounding narrative) not being authentic or historical, in the sense of actually having been delivered at Delphi.

While I am certainly sympathetic to the latter observation, I disagree with the conclusion that is frequently drawn from it: that we are dealing with ‘mere’ stories, the narrative fabric of which we must dismantle in order to get to the historical reality underneath. Instead, I suggest we take seriously the enigmatic mode as a critically important aspect of how the human–divine relationship is set up in these stories.

Indeed, the case studies in the previous chapters have shown that the enigmatic language of the oracle serves as a highly meaningful form of communication: it constitutes what I have elsewhere called a ‘mediation triplet’, describing the human condition by situating it in three dimensions: on the ontological, the cognitive and the temporal planes.¹⁸

¹⁶ Hdt. 1.53.

¹⁷ This is not entirely correct – there are, of course, other possible outcomes, e.g. a tie or a narrow victory by one or the other side which does not result in the destruction of either empire.

¹⁸ See in detail Kindt 2008.

Enigmatic prophecies negotiate, first and foremost, the ontological plane between the human and the divine spheres. Throughout the individual chapters of this book we have seen that the enigmatic divine words represent (and thereby maintain) the ontological distance between the omniscience of the gods on the one hand and on the other the human condition with its much more limited insight into the nature of things. Pretty much all stories investigated in this book focused on this point. It was a prominent feature of the answer delivered to Croesus in response to the oracle test ([chapter 2](#)) and part of Parmeniscus' insight on the sacred island of Delos ([chapter 6](#)).

Yet, at the same time, the enigmatic divine words also mediate on the temporal plane. Oracle stories (and oracular divination itself) are based on the assumption that the gods can survey past, present and future: humans cannot. Humans therefore turn to the oracle to benefit from the superior vantage point of the gods. By challenging us to find the meaning of a prediction in some event or situation still to come, the enigmatic voice of the oracle basically urges us to make connections among the different dimensions of time. At the beginning of the story, when the question is put to the oracle, the past, present and future always appear disjointed. At the end of the story, when the oracle has become fulfilled, a clear connection has emerged. This temporal coherence, however, is directly embedded in the fabric of the narrative itself; it emerges from the very fact that the story is told. The future, open in the beginning of the story, has closed by becoming the present.

This point, however, brings us to a third way in which the 'enigmatic mode' mediates: on the 'heuristic' or 'cognitive' plane, between human knowledge and ignorance. The consultation of the oracle in the beginning of these stories is always warranted by some lack of information or insight. The main part of the story then typically tells of a move from a state of ignorance to a state of knowledge. The focus of most of these stories, as we have seen, is distinctly on the human success or failure in interpreting the oracles correctly.

The enigmatic mode in which the gods frequently speak to those seeking divine advice appears to be central to the way in which oracle stories reflect the world. The enigmatic language in which the gods speak to humanity defines the human condition vis-à-vis the gods – ontologically, temporally and on the cognitive plane. All three aspects of the ‘enigmatic mode’ as a mediation triplet converge in this point.

Given the tentative, searching way in which many of these stories approach the human condition it may seem odd that quite a few serve as aetiological tales. Oracle stories are frequently told to explain the origins of a certain institution, belief or practice, religious or otherwise. We need only think of Herodotus’ explanation of why Croesus lost his empire, of how the oracular features in narrative constructions of Ionian identity in Euripides’ *Ion*. Even the oracle story told by Plato’s Socrates includes such a dimension, in that it seems to explain why Socrates started (and continued) philosophising. But perhaps these two dimensions – the search for meaning and certainty within these stories, and the way in which some of these narratives, as aetiological stories, themselves provide definite answers – fit very much together? Perhaps the point is that the definite answers some of these stories seem to give in the end are counterbalanced by the uncertainty about to get there? Be that as it may, oracle stories ground the specific explanation they may give about a particular cult or institution in a much broader meditation on the human condition vis-à-vis the gods.

The significance of this aspect of Delphic oracle stories cannot be overstated. Unlike other religious traditions, ancient Greek religion famously knew no creed, no dogma and no church to help the community of believers to distinguish right from wrong. The ancient Greeks had no prescriptive set of religious rules or definite views about the supernatural to define them as a community of believers. What ancient Greek religion did have, however, was a number of stories which circulated widely in ancient Greek culture and society and provided what we may well call a ‘hermeneutical’ or ‘narrative’ theology. It is a ‘theology’ because the insights derived from these stories about the supernatural in itself and in relationship to

humanity actually overlap, communicating a systematic set of religious views. This theology, however, is ‘hermeneutical’ or ‘narrative’ because these views do not take the form of a definite (prescribed) list, but can be derived only indirectly, through the interpretation of the stories.¹⁹

At this stage it may be worth pointing out that this ‘theology’ is by no means restricted to oracle stories. Rather, Delphic oracle stories are (a particularly privileged) part of a much larger group of prophetic tales which revolve around the interpretation of dreams, omens and other forms of predictions.²⁰ Like Delphic oracle stories, these tales frequently highlight the same kind of problems in the human quest to participate in the omniscient nature of the gods. We need only think of the struggles of Aeschylus’ Cassandra in the *Oresteia* to get her message across.²¹ Or we may consider the various conversations about what constitutes the right interpretation of a dream or omen in the works of Herodotus, for example.²² The conversation was by no means restricted to narratives revolving around the interpretation of a prophecy from Delphi. Stories similar to the ones examined in this book were also told about other oracular institutions, most notably, perhaps, Dodona and Didyma.²³ Indeed, the very same responses claiming Delphic origins were sometimes also attributed to other oracular institutions, illustrating the fluidity and versatility of the oracular discourse.²⁴

Such prophetic tales, in turn, are part of an even larger body of *epiphanic narratives* – stories revolving around the manifold ways in which the supernatural reveals itself in the human sphere. Oracle stories explore the human–divine encounter

¹⁹ The interdisciplinary study of religions has only relatively recently started to appreciate how fundamental narrative is to theology (see in detail Mautner 1994). Due to the centrality of narrative to ancient Greek views about the supernatural, the study of ancient Greek religion could therefore break new ground here.

²⁰ A ‘privileged part’ due to Delphi’s standing as the most authoritative oracular institution in the ancient world.

²¹ A. A. 1035–1342.

²² See e.g. Hdt. 6.107 (Hippias’ dream); 7.12–19 (Xerxes’ dreams); 9.120 (interpretation of a fish omen).

²³ Didyma: see the catalogue of responses from Didyma in Fontenrose 1978: 417–29. Dodona: see Parke 1967: 1–163; Lhôte 2006.

²⁴ For example the response allegedly delivered to King Pyrrhus at Delphi (according to Ennius *ap. Cic. Div.* 2.56.116) was attributed to Dodona by D.C. fr. 404.

through the medium of language; other epiphanic tales focus on other modes of human–divine interaction.²⁵ The physical appearance of a divinity in the human realm is one such possibility; the presence of the divine manifested through their cult images is another. Yet the principle at work in the possibility of such encounters is always the same: some form of compromise between presence and absence, some sort of negotiation or mediation is needed in order for the two spheres to remain separate.²⁶ The last two chapters of this book in particular have focused on narratives which bring together material and immaterial representations of the supernatural, again illustrating the way in which oracle stories are part of a much broader effort in making the absent (divine) present.

Oracle stories, it appears, do not give easy answers to easy questions. They offer complex narratives featuring (and indeed participating) in the human quest for orientation. They do so not only through the kind of questions humanity puts to the gods, but also, and in particular, by describing the human condition vis-à-vis the supernatural. A final point concerns the question of how these stories, and the forms of narrative and reflection typical of them, sit within ancient Greek religion more widely. Because the focus of this study was firmly on individual tellings of oracle stories, some final reflections on the nexus of religion and storytelling as exemplified in these stories are now in order.

Oracle Stories as a Way of ‘Making Sense’

If, as has frequently been argued, religion is indeed a way of ‘making sense’ of the world, then narrative is one of the ways – perhaps *the* way – in which this ‘sense-making’ occurs.²⁷ Narrative achieves this through two individual but ultimately interrelated operations: first, by singling out certain aspects

²⁵ On epiphany see Platt 2011; Petridou 2016.

²⁶ See the excellent discussion in Vernant 1991a of the different strategies by which the gods maintain alterity even when they assume human form.

²⁷ For religion as a way of ‘making sense’ of the world see Geertz 1973: 87–125; Gould 2001 with Kindt 2012a: 55–89.

from the unordered sum of all things that constitute the past (events, people, places and the multiple connections among them); and second, by presenting them as part of an ordered sequence that, by the very nature of being narrated, establishes connections between these events.²⁸ In this way the events are explained during the very process of being assigned a certain position in the storyline: as the beginning, middle or end of a given course of events.

A good example of how oracle stories are told to ‘make sense’ of the world in this respect comes from Thucydides. In the second year of the Peloponnesian War we hear about the outbreak of the plague that affected large numbers of the Athenian populace (including Thucydides himself), resulting in numerous casualties and a general state of fear and despair.²⁹ Thucydides goes to great lengths to describe the effects of the disease on the human body and on the citizenship of Athens.

To conclude this account of the plague he tells us how the Athenians resorted to storytelling to frame – and thereby explain – the plague. Apparently they recalled a certain prophecy, predicting a ‘Dorian war’ together with some sort of calamity befalling the Athenian populace. Apparently a dispute broke out as to whether the predicted calamity consisted of *limos* (‘famine’) or *loimos* (‘pestilence’).³⁰ Thucydides rather laconically comments on the way in which the people reshaped the original oracle story according to what the situation required, hence favouring the reading of ‘pestilence’ to ‘famine’: ἐνίκησε δὲ ἐπὶ τοῦ παρόντος εἰκότως λοιμὸν εἰρῆσθαι· οἱ γὰρ ἄνθρωποι πρὸς ἃ ἔπασχον τὴν μνήμην ἐποιοῦντο, ‘the view prevailed at the time that “pestilence” was the original word; and quite naturally, for men’s recollections conformed to their sufferings’.³¹

²⁸ Cf. Altman’s point: ‘By itself, daily life cannot be said to constitute narratives, however much narrative material it may provide. But when a naturalist novelist cuts daily life into slices, thus delimiting and framing it, then the narratives implicit in life may be revealed.’ Altman 2008: 18.

²⁹ Th. 2.48.1–54.5.

³⁰ On *loimos/limos*, see also Bremmer 2008: 177, 306 (with further bibliography).

³¹ Th. 2.54.3 (transl. Smith 1919).

Thucydides also speculates as to what would happen were another Dorian war to break out, resulting in a famine: surely then people would adjust their story to fit the occasion? Finally, he goes on to tell us that the Athenians at that time also recalled another oracle delivered to the Spartans in response to their question of whether to wage war against the Athenians. Apparently that oracle had predicted a ‘mighty victory’ achieved with the help of the god. Thucydides rounds off his account with the observation that the Athenians now considered this second prophecy, too, to be fulfilled.³² For the plague had erupted right after the Spartan invasion of Attica and affected the Athenians but not the inhabitants of the Peloponnese (the implication being that this was a sign of divine intervention on behalf of the Spartans). Thucydides’ examples illustrate above all how oracle stories were shaped and reshaped to ‘make sense’ of singular events, such as the plague.

In *Rethinking Greek Religion* I have argued that even though there is much to recommend the view that religion makes sense of the world, this perspective ultimately does not tell the whole story.³³ Religion should not be seen just as a way of sense-making: religion is not always and necessarily secondary to the world it is said to ‘make sense’ of. Instead, I have suggested that religion is also *a priori*; one of those aspects of the world that continuously come into existence as we move forward in time. In addition to its role of sense-making, religion is also a primary force, which shapes and creates those aspects of the world to which it applies.³⁴

Just as we found narrative central to the way in which religion ‘makes sense’ of the world, it is also key to this second, world-creating aspect of religion. This is because the existing narratives religion offers will have a direct impact on how someone socialised in this religious tradition perceives and

³² Th. 2. 54.4–5.

³³ See Kindt 2012a: 74–80.

³⁴ This last point (‘to which it applies’) is of course exactly the point on which the world view of the religious believer and that of the secular atheist tend to conflict.

acts in certain situations. An excellent example to illustrate this point in the ancient Greek context, and for Delphic oracle stories, is Herodotus’ account of the prophecy delivered to the Athenians prior to the battle of Salamis.

According to this account, the Athenians send out a delegation to Delphi during the Persian Wars, some time prior to the battle of Salamis.³⁵ When they receive a highly enigmatic prophecy, they famously refuse to take it back to Athens and demand a second (better) oracle. They do eventually receive a second prophecy, just as enigmatic as the first one, but which seems slightly more optimistic. The Athenians, we hear, write down this second prophecy and take it to Athens, where its meaning becomes the subject of a public debate carried out in the open (in the agora). A number of rival explanations are put forward, in particular revolving around the meaning of the ominous ‘wooden wall’ mentioned in the prediction. After various other attempts to interpret the oracle’s central metaphor, Themistocles steps forward. He suggests that the ‘wooden wall’ refers to the fleet and is able to convince his fellow Athenians of his interpretation.

Oracle stories, this example illustrates, evolve together with the world to which they refer. They can even shape this world. Themistocles is ultimately able to realise his military plans because he has the more convincing story to tell. Why is his story more convincing? It offers the Athenians a narrative of possible victory, which is more appealing than the alternative. The interpretation of the other speakers, in contrast, merely seems to offer a narrative of defeat.³⁶ By linking his vision of an Athenian victory to the central metaphor of the oracle he is able to represent his military strategy as divinely inspired and ordained.

³⁵ Hdt. 7.140–3. On this story, see also chapter 2 above. On this passage see also Georges 1986; Hands 1965; Bowden 2005: 100–7; Scott 2014: 116–18.

³⁶ Herodotus explicitly says that the Athenians liked Themistocles’ interpretation more than that of the professional oracle interpreters, who had apparently argued against a naval battle and, indeed, any opposition to the Persian invasion of Attica. See Hdt. 7.143.

Conclusion: Religion and Storytelling

From this point of view, it is telling that Herodotus nowhere says that Themistocles hit on the correct interpretation of the oracle's central metaphor (the 'wooden wall'). His interpretation of the prophecy is ultimately confirmed simply by the success it brings: the sweeping victory of the Athenians in the naval battle at Salamis. The successful interpretation *is* the right interpretation. No other confirmation of the correctness of Themistocles' interpretation is needed.

Outlook

We have come far in our own journey to and from Delphi and in our quest for the oracle's meaning. Not only have we visited and revisited Delphi time and again together with the people in the stories, we have also seriously considered the contribution these narratives make to the ancient Greek conversation about the nature of the gods and their relationship to humanity – a conversation that we call 'ancient Greek religion'.

Yet, in contrast to the oracle story and the full and finite sense of closure it typically conveys in the end, hence offsetting the sense of openness and uncertainty in the beginning of the story, our story can only ever come to a provisional conclusion. For in real life such a sense of closure remains always just beyond human reach. Nor would it even be desirable. For if it were possible to find a final answer to all the questions we may have, storytelling would almost certainly come to an end. And who would want to live in a world without stories? More research is certainly needed to unveil further dimensions within these narratives and the way in which they relate to other forms of religious storytelling in ancient Greece and elsewhere. Perhaps some readers of this book will be inspired to pick up one or more of the threads?

APPENDIX

PLUTARCH – A PHILOSOPHICAL ENQUIRY INTO AN ENIGMATIC DIVINE SIGN

Introduction

This appendix to the study of Delphic oracle stories is focused on a different kind of text, featuring yet a different kind of storytelling from the one under investigation in the main chapters of the book: Plutarch's dialogue *The E at Delphi*. In this dialogue Plutarch (c. 50–120 CE), who was himself a priest at Delphi, recounts a conversation he had many years earlier when he was still a young man about the meaning of an ominous letter E that could be found at the oracle of Apollo at Delphi. The text is part of the so-called *Moralia*, a collection of seventy-one essays and dialogues, written by Plutarch himself, all similar in style and register but extraordinarily diverse in content, touching upon themes as different as *On How to Listen to a Lecture* or *How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend*.¹ Three of these texts, including our treatise, constitute the so-called Pythian dialogues. Set at Delphi, these dialogues investigate questions pertaining to oracular divination, including the reasons for the decline of oracles in Plutarch's time (*Obsolescence of Oracles*) or the question why oracles were apparently spoken in a much more prosaic fashion in Plutarch's time than in older times (*Oracles at Delphi No Longer Given in Verse*).²

In this instance, the participants in the dialogue (most notably Ammonius, Lamprias, Plutarch, Theon, Eustrophus,

¹ *The E at Delphi*: Plu. *Moralia* 384D–394C. Plutarch and Delphi: Lamberton 2001: 52–9. See also Ziegler 1951: 659–62, Swain 1991. 'On Listening to Lectures': Plu. *Moralia* 37C–48D; 'How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend': Plu. *Moralia* 48E–74E.

² *The Oracles at Delphi No Longer Given in Verse*: Plu. *Moralia* 394D–409D. *The Obsolescence of Oracles*: Plu. *Moralia* 409F–438E. On the unity of the Pythian dialogues see Babut 1992.

Nicander) enquire into the meaning of the epsilon which had allegedly been on display at Delphi since time immemorial. The legendary Seven Sages of Greece allegedly dedicated the original wooden version of the E sometime in the distant past. By Plutarch's time it had been 'upgraded' twice: the wooden epsilon was first replaced by a bronze version dedicated by the Athenians, and later by a gold version of the same letter, dedicated by Livia, the wife of the Roman emperor Augustus.³

Classical scholars have variously sought to determine the location of the letter, based on references to the sign in a number of literary sources, the archaeological evidence and its depiction on Roman coins (see [fig. 1](#)).⁴ Unfortunately, however, this has invariably proved difficult. According to Plutarch's treatise, the epsilon was on display somewhere towards the entrance of the temple of Apollo at Delphi, together with a number of other Delphic maxims, most notably perhaps the famous 'know thyself' (*gnōthi seauton*).⁵

However, archaeological remains and the other literary sources do not provide reliable and coherent information about the E.⁶ The most likely location of the letter remains the *pronaos* of the temple or its immediate surroundings; those visiting the oracle would have seen this sign when they entered the temple. The philosophical conversation Plutarch recalls takes the sign and its prominent location as a point of departure. It turns almost entirely on the question of what the sign was supposed to tell those intending to consult the oracle. Surely its message must have been vital enough to the Delphic enterprise to warrant its long existence in such a conspicuous location?

To cut a long story short: the dialogue itself ends in *aporia* – the ultimate meaning of the sign cannot be established. Yet we

³ See Plu. *Moralia* 385F–386A.

⁴ Delphic coins from the time of Hadrian and the elder Faustina show the temple of Apollo with the depiction of an E. Some scholars have also suggested that there was also an E depicted on the early *omphalos* at Delphi. See Imhoof-Blumer and Gardner 1887, pl. 10; Bates 1925; Bousquet 1951.

⁵ See Plu. *Moralia* 385D. The third maxim said 'nothing in excess'. Both The 'E' and the 'know thyself' are mentioned together in the text: Plu. *Moralia* 392A, 394C. See Goettling 1851 for a discussion of all Delphic maxims.

⁶ The debate is nicely summarised in Obsieger 2013: 9–16 (with further literature).



Figure 1. Roman coin, second century CE

Front: portrait of Faustina Senior (wife of Antoninus Pius)

Reverse: front view of the temple of Apollo at Delphi featuring the Ε
Münzkabinett der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, 18249069

will find that in the course of the discussion, the typical themes of traditional oracle stories feature prominently – albeit in a different form: the enigmatic mode of the oracle, the human need for interpretation and the potential for misinterpretation, the ontological gap that separates humanity from divinity which the enigmatic oracular language seems to bridge. All are themes touched upon by the participants in the course of the discussion of the mysterious letter E. In contrast to their role in traditional oracle stories, however, the participants in the dialogue approach these and other oracular themes in a much more immediate and analytical fashion, appropriate to the business of conducting a philosophical enquiry. The chapter therefore contributes to our understanding of Delphic oracle stories by raising the question of the ‘boundedness’ of the oracular discourse in the ancient world – a question we will revisit later.

The ‘Enigmatic Mode’ Revisited

The Greek letter E, the meaning of which this dialogue purports to investigate, is a polysemic Greek sign. Like many

oracular utterances, it has potentially more than one meaning: as the fifth sign in the Greek alphabet, the letter E also denotes the number five. Moreover, considered as a full Greek word, the E – pronounced EI – is the Greek word for ‘if’.⁷ At the same time, it is also the second person singular of the Greek verb ‘to be’. These multiple meanings are at the core of the dialogue, which revolves around the examination of different interpretations of the portentous sign.

Altogether seven different potential meanings of the E are discussed in the course of the dialogue:⁸

1. E as a representation of the number five has been dedicated to Delphi by the Seven Sages in order to correct the widespread belief that their number was seven.
2. The letter E refers to Apollo. Just as the E is the second vowel in the alphabet, the sun is the second planet in the solar system. The sun, in turn, is generally associated with Apollo.
3. E is pronounced EI and means ‘if’. As such it is typical of the way in which questions to Apollo were formulated at the Delphic oracle. EI is ‘the figure and the form of the consultation of the god, and it holds the first place in every question of those who consult the oracle and inquire if they shall be victorious, if they shall marry, if it is to their advantage to sail over the sea, if to go abroad’.⁹
4. EI means ‘if only’ and therefore denotes both the optative force and the interrogative force of many enquiries made to the Delphic oracle.
5. Apollo wants to support logical reasoning: ‘EI’ means ‘if’ and this conjunction is an important word in logic to construct a syllogism.

⁷ On the pronunciation of the letter E see Allen 1987: 168, 173; Obsieger 2013: 67–71.

⁸ Plu. *Moralia* 385D/E–394C. The following list is adapted from Babbitt 1936: 194–5. A more extensive summary of the structure and contents of the text (in particular of the individual positions articulated by the speakers) can be found in Obsieger 2013: 19–46.

⁹ All translations of Plutarch throughout this chapter are by Babbitt 1936. I have made alterations where necessary.

6. E represents the number five, an important figure in mathematics, physiognomy, philosophy and music.
7. EI denotes 'you are' and is the appropriate way for humans to address Apollo, because only a god has real Being. The god occupies a position elevated from the ever-changing nature of the human world. This enables the divinity to gain insight and knowledge into the true nature of things.

What is this conversation about, which Plutarch recalls for the reader, a conversation cast in dialogic form and set at Delphi? The obvious answer is, of course, to point to the ostensible problem the dialogue seems to solve and say that its purpose is just that: to uncover the real meaning of the letter E.¹⁰ A number of more or less fanciful scholarly interpretations of the Delphic epsilon have been suggested over time. Jane Harrison, for example, has argued that the epsilon was an abstract depiction of Apollo's palm featuring the three Graces.¹¹ Yet this and other scholarly suggestions have not proved more convincing (nor more ultimately successful) than those suggested within the dialogue.

Another attempt to find an answer to the same question would be to investigate, as scholars have done, the philosophical positions paraded by the individual speakers throughout the treatise, tracing them to major philosophical schools of thought.¹² A number of different philosophical perspectives are articulated throughout the dialogue (including Pythagorean, Skeptic and Stoic positions).

While this approach has revealed insights into the philosophical background and intellectual affiliations of the individual speakers, this perspective has not been able to offer a comprehensive reading of the dialogue. Indeed, we may be tempted to say that, in some sense, such scholarly preoccupations with the *realia* of the dialogue – including the interest in finding the actual location and the real meaning of the E,

¹⁰ See e.g. Bates 1925; Fries 1930; Defradas 1954: 268–83; Griffiths 1955; Berman and Losada 1975; Hodge 1981; Stasinopoulos 1981; Comoth 1995.

¹¹ See Harrison 1905 as discussed in Obsieger 2013: 15.

¹² See e.g. Flacelière 1941: 18–26; Betz 1990: 142–6; Babut 1993; Opsomer 2006.

and to pinpoint the philosophical background of the speakers – is not entirely dissimilar to scholarly efforts to uncover the ‘real’ history behind oracle stories (see the introduction to this book).

Yet, we may wonder whether there is not more to the sign itself and to the conversation about its interpretation than these answers suggest. After all, the other Delphic maxims (in particular the ‘know thyself’ and ‘nothing in excess’) can be read as a direct reference to the ‘moral’ of many oracle stories as they feature throughout Greek thought and literature. Moreover, the other two Pythian dialogues (*The Oracles at Delphi No Longer Given in Verse* and *Obsolescence of Oracles*) both raise questions and problems central to oracular divination as practised at Delphi. So should we not look for a similar Delphic connection in this dialogue as well? Plutarch, at least, goes to great lengths to emphasise that in his own time the presence of the letter E at Delphi was still regarded as noteworthy. It had acquired the status of ‘a sacred offering and something worth seeing’.¹³ So we may wonder with the participants in the dialogue: just what kind of commentary about the oracular discourse does the philosophical enquiry into the enigmatic E provide?

In asking this question I follow other scholars who have explored this dialogue as a specifically Delphic treatise.¹⁴ Yet in line with the other chapters of this book, the focus of my investigation here is again on the meaning of the dialogue in the context of Delphic oracle stories more generally. I suggest we follow the flow of Plutarch’s narrative rather than reading against it. If we investigate the dialogue as a whole (rather than individual philosophical stances expressed within it and their capacity to reveal the ‘real’ meaning of the E), we can appreciate the way in which it alludes to well-known tropes of the oracular discourse. The dialogue does so not only in its subject matter but also in the way it unfolds. Plutarch’s

¹³ Plu. *Moralia* 385A.

¹⁴ Duff 1999; Lamberton 2001.

treatise, I shall argue, emerges as a commentary on the nature of human–divine communication.

Enigma and Interpretation

Plutarch introduces the dialogue with a statement that leads straight to the centre of interest. He introduces the subject matter of the dialogue around which the later discussions will evolve with the following words:

ὁ δ' οὖν φίλος Ἀπόλλων ἔοικε τὰς μὲν περὶ τὸν βίον ἀπορίας ἰᾶσθαι καὶ διαλύειν θεμιστεύων τοῖς χρωμένοις, τὰς δὲ περὶ τὸν λόγον αὐτὸς ἐνιέναι καὶ προβάλλειν τῷ φύσει φιλοσόφῳ τῆς ψυχῆς ὄρεξιν ἐμποιῶν ἀγωγὸν ἐπὶ τὴν ἀλήθειαν, ὥς ἄλλοις τε πολλοῖς δῆλόν ἐστι καὶ τῇ [περὶ] τοῦ Ε καθιερώσει.

It seems that our beloved Apollo finds a remedy and a solution for the problems connected with our life by the oracular responses which he gives to those who consult him; but the problems connected with reasoning it seems that he himself launches and poses to him who is by nature inclined to the love of knowledge, thus creating in the soul a craving that leads onwards to the truth, as is clear in many other ways, but particularly in the dedication of the E.¹⁵

A direct link is made here between Apollo's oracles and the Greek letter E. Moreover, Plutarch distinguishes between simple questions of everyday life which Apollo answers and solves straightforwardly, and more sophisticated problems to which Apollo can offer only complex answers that require human interpretation to expose fully their different dimensions. The image of the letter E is taken as representative of the second category of problems; the problem of 'making sense' of this letter is the subject of those 'inclined to the love of knowledge' – that is, the participants within the dialogue.

However, Plutarch's treatise is more than just an abstract philosophical debate about the interpretation of an obscure representation. The dialogue itself is laid out as a complex discussion of an enigmatic sign appearing in a divine context (the oracle at Delphi). Herein lies another, more profound parallel between Delphic oracle stories and philosophical reflection.

¹⁵ Plu. *Moralia* 384E–F.

Like the enquiry into the meaning of an oracle, philosophical reflection starts from a problem arising from the fact that access to a crucial bit of information or insight is (at least temporarily) denied. Both work towards the (re)solution of the problem. In *The E at Delphi* the enigmatic divine sign is explicitly linked to the discussion of problems resulting from human efforts to ‘make sense’ of the enigmatic mode in which many oracles were cast. The structure of the whole dialogue, therefore, in some way represents the interpretation of an enigmatic oracle. There seems to be a direct link between enigmatic divine signs and philosophical enquiry similar to the one made by Socrates and discussed in [chapter 4](#).

At its core, the text revolves around the interpretation of a sign associated with Delphi, both in its location and its potential meanings (see above). Yet like an enigmatic oracle, the E is in need of further investigation. The E challenges those humans who seek to interpret it in a fashion similar to enigmatic oracles: both oracles and the epsilon allow diverging readings and both have the potential to refer to various things. Like an enigmatic oracle, the representation of the letter E confronts those trying to make sense of it with a crisis in context. In order to gain any information from the sign, those interpreting it must break the code which connects the signifier with its signified. In its capacity to refer to many things, the representation of the letter E at Delphi mirrors the challenge faced by many who have received an enigmatic oracle: knowledge and meaning can emerge only as a result of human interpretation of a divine sign. In both instances this interpretation takes the form of finding the proper context in which the sign ‘makes sense’.

In Plutarch’s dialogue, the need for interpretation is emphasised by Ammonius, who opens the dialogue with a general observation about the nature of Apollo:

“Οτι μὲν γὰρ οὐχ ἦττον ὁ θεὸς φιλόσοφος ἢ μάντις, ἐδόκει πᾶσιν ὀρθῶς πρὸς τοῦτο τῶν ὀνομάτων ἕκαστον Ἀμμώνιος τίθεσθαι καὶ διδάσκειν, ὡς Πύθιος μὲν ἐστι τοῖς ἀρχομένοις μανθάνειν καὶ διαπυνθάνεσθαι, Δῆλιος δὲ καὶ Φαναῖος οἷς ἤδη τι δηλοῦται καὶ ὑποφαίνεται τῆς ἀληθείας, Ἰσμήνιος δὲ τοῖς ἔχουσι τὴν ἐπιστήμην, καὶ Λεσχηνόριος ὅταν ἐνεργῶσι καὶ ἀπολαύωσι χρώμενοι τῷ διαλέγεσθαι καὶ φιλοσοφεῖν πρὸς ἀλλήλους. ἔπει δὲ τοῦ φιλοσοφεῖν ἔφη ‘τὸ ζητεῖν <ἀρχή, τοῦ δὲ

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ζητεῖν> τὸ θαυμάζειν καὶ ἀπορεῖν, εἰκότως τὰ πολλὰ τῶν περὶ τὸν θεὸν ἔοικεν αἰνίγμασι κατακεκρύφθαι [καὶ] λόγον τινὰ ποθοῦντα διὰ τί καὶ διδασκαλίαν τῆς αἰτίας’.

That the god is no less a philosopher than a prophet Ammonius seemed to all to postulate and prove correctly, with reference to this or to that one of his several titles; that he is the ‘Pythian’ (Inquirer) for those that are beginning to learn and inquire, the ‘Delian’ (Clarifier) and the ‘Phanaean’ (Discloser) for those to whom some part of the truth is becoming clear and is being disclosed; the ‘Ismenian’ (Expert) for those who have knowledge and the ‘Leschenorian’ (Conversationalist) when people have active enjoyment of conversation and philosophic intercourse with each other. ‘Since’, he went on to say, ‘enquiry is the beginning of philosophy, and wonder and uncertainty the beginning of enquiry, it seems only natural that the greater part of what concerns the god should be concealed in riddles, and should call for some account of the wherefore and an explanation of its cause.’¹⁶

The explanations of the epithets are pseudo-etymologies but the names themselves are normal epithets of Apollo.¹⁷ These names seem to suggest varying degrees of proficiency in human–divine communication. Indeed, different levels of human competence in gaining knowledge from divine signs are distinguished here. As we learn from the last sentence, human puzzlement about a divine sign which does not reveal its meaning directly initiates this process of learning. By ‘calling for some account’ (λόγον τινὰ ποθοῦντα), the enigmatic sign sparks human reasoning and thinking about possible meanings but does not reveal knowledge itself. Knowledge is gained only through human reasoning and reflection on enigmatic divine signs.

Thus, in the beginning of the dialogue, we learn that knowledge cannot be gained passively from the gods but results from active human interpretation and reasoning (about an enigmatic divine sign). The sign functions as a focal point or divine proposal around which human interpretation and the knowledge resulting from it can emerge.

¹⁶ Plu. *Moralia* 385B–C.

¹⁷ See Babut 1993: 209, who sees a connection between the epithets and Stoicism. For an extensive discussion of these epithets, some of which also feature in other sources, see Obsieger 2013: 111–12.

And, indeed, this is exactly what happens in the remainder of the dialogue. These introductory statements anticipate the further course of events represented in the text, because this debating and interpreting of a sign in a divine context is exactly what the treatise is all about. In expressing different views of the meaning of E, the participants of the dialogue gain knowledge from the divine sign. The varying degrees of sophistication and expertise with which they conduct the discussion lend proportional weight to the claims of their interpretation to be ‘true’. The varying levels of sophistication in the statements and observations put forward in the course of the conversation remind us of the different levels of human competence in gaining knowledge from the gods, as also expressed in the epithets of Apollo.

As Daniel Babut has observed, the individual contributions to the discussion are arranged in ascending order.¹⁸ Nearly every statement claims to be superior to the ones given before. In this way our attention is directed towards the end of the dialogue. Here we expect to find the most elaborate and sophisticated reading of the E. Had Plutarch not already let the penny drop towards the beginning of the dialogue – he himself does not know the original meaning of the E, hence disclosing fact that the conversation will not result in a solution to the problem¹⁹ – it would be here that we would hope to find the revelation of its true meaning. At this stage in the dialogue Plutarch’s teacher Ammonius, the same speaker who opened the discussion, takes the floor again.

‘οὐτ’ οὖν ἀριθμὸν οὔτε τάξιν οὔτε σύνδεσμον οὐτ’ ἄλλο τῶν ἐλλειπῶν μορίων οὐδὲν οἶμα τὸ γράμμα σημαίνειν· ἀλλ’ ἔστιν αὐτοτελὴς τοῦ θεοῦ προσαγόρευσις καὶ προσφώνησις ἅμα τῷ ῥήματι τὸν φθεγγόμενον εἰς ἔννοιαν καθιστάσα τῆς τοῦ θεοῦ δυνάμεως.’

¹⁸ Babut 1992: 194. This order becomes evident from the way in which any given contribution to the dialogue is linked up with the following one. There is always a statement which expresses the superiority of the new point of view. See e.g. Plu. *Moralia* 391E–F where Ammonius, before the last interpretation of the E, does not so much refute the previous one but relativises it, even though he has previously (387F) referred to the interpretation preceding his final one as the right one.

¹⁹ Obsieger 2013: 19.

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‘I am therefore of the opinion that the significance of the letter is neither a numeral nor a list nor a conjunction nor any of the subordinate parts of the speech. No, it is an address and salutation to the god, complete in itself, which, by being spoken, brings him who utters it to thoughts of the god’s power.’²⁰

This is of course a rather general statement, itself in need of an explanation. This explanation, however, is duly offered by Ammonius himself who adds:

‘Ἡμῖν μὲν γὰρ ὄντως τοῦ εἶναι μέτεστιν οὐδέν, ἀλλὰ πᾶσα θνητὴ φύσις ἐν μέσῳ γενέσεως καὶ φθορᾶς γενομένη φάσμα παρέχει καὶ δόκησιν ἄμυδρὰν καὶ ἀβέβαιον αὐτῆς· ἂν δὲ τὴν διάνοιαν ἐπερείσῃς λαβέσθαι βουλόμενος, ὥσπερ ἡ σφοδρὰ περιδραξίς ὕδατος τῷ πιεῖν καὶ εἰς ταῦτ’ ἀσπάζεσθαι διαρρέον ἀπόλλυσι τὸ περιλαμβανόμενον, οὕτω τῶν παθητῶν καὶ μεταβλητῶν ἐκάστου τὴν ἄγαν ἐνάργειαν ὁ λόγος διώκων ἀποσφάλλεται τῇ μὲν εἰς τὸ γιγνόμενον αὐτοῦ τῇ δ’ εἰς τὸ φθειρόμενον, οὐδενὸς λαβέσθαι μένοντος οὐδ’ ὄντως ὄντος δυνάμενος.’

‘The fact is that we really have no part nor parcel in Being, but everything of a mortal nature is at some stage between coming into existence and passing away, and presents only a dim and uncertain semblance and appearance of itself; and if you apply the whole force of your mind in your desire to apprehend it, it is like unto the violent grasping of water, which, by squeezing and compression, loses the handful enclosed, as it spurts through the fingers; even so Reason, pursuing the exceedingly clear appearance of every one of those things that are susceptible to modification and change, is baffled by the one aspect of its coming into being, and by the other of its passing away; and thus it is unable to apprehend a single thing that is abiding or really existent.’²¹

With this observation we seem to have returned to the different modes of human and divine knowledge we also saw at play in of the previous chapters. True recognition requires us to judge from the position of a stable and independent observer, a position which ultimately is available only to the gods.²² Because humans are part of an ever-changing world, they do not have such a stable, independent point of view:

ᾧ δὲ μάλιστα τὴν νόησιν ἐπερείδοντες τοῦ χρόνου τὸ ‘ἐνέστηκε’ καὶ τὸ ‘πάρεστι’ καὶ τὸ ‘νῦν’ φθεγγόμεθα, τοῦτ’ αὖ πάλιν ἄγαν ἐνδυσόμενος ὁ λόγος ἀπόλλυται.

²⁰ Plu. *Moralia* 391F.

²¹ Plu. *Moralia* 392A–B.

²² As Plutarch puts it: ‘But god is (if there be need to say so), and he exists for no fixed time, but for the everlasting ages which are immovable, timeless, and undeviating, in which there is no earlier nor later, no future nor past, no older nor younger; but he,

Appendix: Plutarch – An Enigmatic Divine Sign

ἐκθλίβεται γὰρ εἰς τὸ μέλλον καὶ τὸ παρωχημένον ὥσπερ αὐγὴ²³ βουλομένοις ἰδεῖν
ἐξ ἀνάγκης διιστάμενον. εἰ δὲ ταῦτ' αὖ μετροῦντι πέπονθεν ἢ μετρουμένη φύσις,
οὐδὲν αὐτῇ μένον οὐδ' ὄν ἐστιν, ἀλλὰ γιγνόμενα πάντα καὶ φθειρόμενα κατὰ τὴν
πρὸς τὸν χρόνον συννέμειν.

And as for that on which we most rely to support our conception of time, as we utter the words, it is here, it is at hand, and now – all this again reason, entering in, demolishes utterly. For reason, like a ray of sunshine, is squeezed into the future and the past though we wish to see them as of necessity separate. And if Nature, when it is measured, is subject to the same process as is the agent that measures it, then there is nothing in Nature that has permanence or even existence, but all things are in the process of creation or destruction according to where they stand in time.²⁴

The dialogue ends, as it were, in *aporia*. The final answer to the question of the meaning of the letter E on the wall of the temple of Apollo at Delphi does not provide the expected ‘true’ or ‘final’ interpretation.²⁵ Even the last speaker, despite the authority he carries as Plutarch’s teacher, cannot offer a convincing account of the letter’s meaning. Instead, the last interpretation offers some thoughts on the nature of the previous contributions to the discussion. It says that human recognition (and the knowledge resulting from it) is simply an approach towards the truth and can never be identical with that truth.²⁶

From this point of view, the qualitatively strongest argument made in the course of the dialogue also includes the last suggested interpretation. Ammonius makes the point that the preceding interpretations are the only means by which humans can even draw near the truth. But these interpretations cannot claim to be the definitive truth, for they cannot grasp the true nature of the E. Thus, the last attempt at defining the meaning

being One, has with only one “Now” completely filled “For ever”; and only when Being is after his pattern, is it in reality Being, not having been nor about to be, nor has it had a beginning nor is it destined to come to an end.’ Plu. *Moralia* 393A–B.

²³ The *TLG* text has ‘αὐτῇ’; however, Sieveking’s Teubner edition (1929, repr. 1972) of which (according to the *TLG* bibliography) the *TLG* text is a transcription has ‘αὐγῇ’. I would like to thank Brennan Nicholson for pointing this out to me.

²⁴ Plu. *Moralia* 392F–393A.

²⁵ Rosenberger 2001: 122 interprets the absence of a correct interpretation at the end of the dialogue as a deliberate attempt to invite speculation about its meaning.

²⁶ See Betz 1990: 142–5 for a discussion of the philosophical foundation of Ammonius’ last contribution to the discussion. See also Whittaker 1965.

Conclusion

of the E contains a paradox: it is itself a human interpretation of a divine sign that says that true human interpretation is not possible. As a typically Delphic emblem, the letter E therefore both reveals and withholds information and in doing so exemplifies the problems of human interpretation more generally, as we also see them paraded in the oracle stories discussed in the other chapters of this book.

Insight into the limits of human cognition – and not the meaning of the sign itself – is the prize the participants in the dialogue take away from the conversation. At first sight, this seems to be quite different from the way in which enigmatic divine words are represented in stories about oracle consultations. In Delphic oracle stories, as we see in other chapters of this book, divine words, even of the enigmatic variety, always end up with a straightforward meaning, a clear referent in the human sphere. Yet this is only a superficial difference between the story Plutarch tells us in *The E at Delphi* and traditional oracle stories featured elsewhere in Greek thought and literature. For the insights the reader is meant to take away from Plutarch's treatise coincide with the moral of many traditional Delphic oracle stories: in both instances these insights go beyond an understanding of the sign's real meaning (which in the case of oracle stories frequently turns out to be trivial anyway). Rather, it concerns the insight into the limits of human cognition itself and vis-à-vis the ancient Greek gods.

Conclusion

Differences between human and divine knowledge, human and divine meaning, human and divine interpretation are central to Plutarch's dialogue *The E at Delphi*. In one way, the treatise can be read as an enquiry into the nature of human-divine communication, a treatise which exemplifies in its own narrative structure the very same general problems we already saw at play in Delphic oracle stories and the way in

which they showcase problems of human interpretation and understanding.

The E at Delphi starts from the point that enigmatic divine signs require human interpretation to ‘make sense’. The same is true for many oracle stories featuring enigmatic divine language. In these stories humans typically find themselves challenged by an enigmatic divine sign, just like the participants in Plutarch’s dialogue. In the end, however, Plutarch draws a more pessimistic picture of the scope and limits of human knowledge than that typically generated by Delphic oracle stories. In contrast to the participants in Plutarch’s dialogue, who cannot figure out the ultimate meaning of the Delphic epsilon, those attempting to interpret enigmatic divine utterances are sometimes successful in ‘making sense’ of the riddles and enigmas of human existence. Sometimes they are indeed able to produce what seems to be the correct reading of enigmatic divine signs and act accordingly and with success. Perhaps, then, it is the self-deception, the fatal feeling of certainty to which many of those who misread Delphic oracles fell victim, against which Plutarch writes in this dialogue? Perhaps this is also the reason why the mysterious letter E, together with *know thyself*, could be found at the entrance to the temple of Apollo at Delphi? If so, both maxims would provide an important clue to all those visiting the oracle as to the kind of experience awaiting them, reminding them of the role they were expected to play in the process of seeking knowledge from the gods. Perhaps, then, the letter provided a shortcut to the set of problems typically involved in all human efforts to ‘make sense’ of the divine?

Be that as it may, what this discussion has revealed is, I think, a remarkable synergy between Plutarch’s dialogue and the themes of Delphic oracle stories as they feature throughout Greek thought and literature. In participating in the oracular discourse in this way, however, Plutarch’s *The E at Delphi* raises a number of questions that are of relevance to our understanding of oracle stories more generally. One such question concerns the boundedness of the oracular discourse.

Conclusion

This appendix has shown that some of the questions raised in accounts of oracle consultations transcend the medium of narrative oracle stories and extend into the sphere of Greek philosophical reflection. It illustrates that the ‘tropes’ of the oracular discourse – the key themes and problems around which the ancient conversation revolves – extend beyond the confines of traditional (narrative) oracle stories. They extend into the sphere of Greek philosophical reflection where they explore the principles and practices of oracular divination on an abstract and condensed level. In oscillating between narrative and reflection, the conversation recalled by Plutarch therefore brings out a significant dimension of oracle stories more generally.

This point, however, flags a number of further questions as to the relationship between what has been called ‘philosophical religion’ on the one hand, and on the other Greek religious reasoning outside of philosophy and ‘lived’ religious beliefs and practices. It shows that in the realm of the oracular, at least, philosophical speculation ultimately contributes to (and participates in) the semantics of the oracular discourse in the ancient Greek world. It also indicates that ancient Greek speculation about the nature of the gods and their availability to humans was informed by (and in turn informed) the practice of oracular divination at Delphi. At Delphi as elsewhere, we may conclude, religious thought (be it philosophical or other) and religious practice converse with each other. Together they shaped the Greek outlook on the world.

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